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HOMESTEADERS

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## THE HOMESTEADERS



ETHEL CHAPMAN

# THE HOMESTEADERS

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# THE HOMESTEADERS

## CHAPTER I

MARY MORAN, general office-girl, emergency reporter, acting editor of the Home Keeping Hearts page, looked from *The Times* fourth story window, out past the last straggling houses of the city limits and across the prairie. It had become something of a habit, this session at the window. Every noon when she returned from her half-hour at the corner lunch counter she stopped on the way to her desk and studied the view, as if something on the far horizon might explain the things that troubled her. Why she persisted she could not have told, herself, for the picture she saw never changed, except that the prairie grew browner and browner as the dry earth waited for rain, and the town became quieter as summer wore on; except for the men who gathered in little groups at the street corners or moved slowly up and down, self-consciously covering the same route several times a day.

It was these idle men who especially worried Mary. Most of them were young like herself. Many of them she knew. Some, she supposed, had come to the West a few years ago, as she had done, because

it was a youth's country. Its growing cities and waiting farm lands needed young men and women. Now its closed factories, its locked grain elevators, worst of all in this part of Southern Saskatchewan, its drought-burned prairie, frankly said, "We have no need of men."

It was almost unbelievable that this could be the country that had captivated her imagination a few years ago. Passing through on a holiday trip she had seen the sun shining on miles of yellow stubble, threshing machines pouring out wheat for an eager market; frosty mornings and clear, cold nights; optimism and friendliness everywhere. The friendliness was still there, warmer than ever perhaps, but everything else had changed. Mary could smile now, remembering the future she had planned for herself when, with no difficulty whatever, she had found a place as office girl on *The Times*. She would be a reporter and then an editor with salary and influence staggeringly high and wide. The West was like that four years ago. She had gone with a party one night to a barn dance in the country, and a nice young farmer had told her, seriously, that two more crops like the one he had just harvested, would put him on easy street for the rest of his life. There had been no crop the next year, nor any year since in that district, as in many others.

Conditions in the city of course reflected all this. It was true that Mary now did both reporting and editing when the one reporter and the one

sub-editor needed her help, for the staff had been cut since the stock market crash; it was also true that she still held the position of general office girl—and that she was now doing it all for a little less salary than *The Times* had paid her in the beginning. And she was not inordinately busy, for the paper, like its staff, had shrunken until now the editor, who was also the owner, was struggling to keep it going at all.

Like scores of other young people in almost every city of the world in that fall of 1931, Mary Moran wondered what the outcome of it all would be. And she was not thinking only of herself. For the present, at least, she had a weekly salary cheque, and even with her Irish generosity dropping a bit of it here and there, she could still manage to feed and clothe herself and to pay the rent of a little apartment that was home. . . . But in the street below were all those young men moving restlessly up and down. In better times, the wheat fields stretching for miles in every direction from the town had taken care of its surplus man-power through the harvest season, but there would be little harvest this year. Again Mary looked from the streets to the prairie, looked again and caught her breath in an Irish "Och!"

"Another fire!" she cried.

The editor heard and came to look, too. Clearly enough, there was a cloud of smoke, maybe thirty miles away, but definitely marked against the sky.

"Someone else being burned out, no doubt," the editor decided. "No one sets a fire these days with every stick about the place as dry as a match."

"And I suppose *The Clarion* will say that another farmer has burned his barn to get the insurance," said Mary.

"Very likely," the editor agreed, and then, "I wish Elliot were here. I'd have him go out and see what he can see—just what the man has lost and what insurance he has, and the truth of how the fire started, if anyone knows. . . . I suppose you couldn't do that? I'll phone the station agent at Wellman—it must be somewhere near there. The train leaves almost any time now."

Already Mary was putting on her hat, and the editor was getting a line through to Wellman. The cause of barn fires had been providing a live controversy between *The Times* and *The Clarion*. For some reason there had been an amazing number of fires. The insurance companies were fighting payment wherever there was an opening for suspicion, and *The Clarion* suggested a lot that could not safely be said outright. *The Times* defended the farmers but often there was little evidence to go on. The fire was usually over before the editor heard of it. Now, while the place was still smoking they would see what they could for themselves, let the public know what a fire meant to a farmer, and publish the cause if they could find it.

The editor came from his conversation with the agent at Wellman.

"It's at Petersen's place, just a mile from the station," he said, "and it's the house, not the barn. The train leaves in twenty minutes. Find out all you can and we'll see what we can do with it. There's no train back till midnight, but I'll be at the office till you get in."

. . . . .

The agent at Wellman told Mary how to get to the Petersen farm, but directions were not necessary. Smoke still rose from the place in a heavy black smudge, and at even a mile away the bawling of the cattle sounded as if a whole herd had gone mad.

"If you meet any cattle on the road, get out of their way," the agent warned her. "Sounds as if they might be out of hand a little. Some of them burned, maybe."

She did not meet any cattle on the road, but as she came nearer to the farm, the noise they made was even more disturbing. There were men working among them, she saw, when she came where the road passed the corral. The cattle huddled in the corner farthest from the men and when they came near, the whole herd bolted against the bars or charged straight towards them. One tall man, his face black with soot under a shapeless old hat, his baggy overalls tucked into high boots, made his way among the animals more easily than the others. He carried

an oil can and seemed to be looking for burns. When he came close to a beast it did not try to get away, and under his hands it became quiet.

Mary went on to the house, or to the place where the house had been. In the smouldering ashes there were some broken dishes and the twisted remains of a cookstove and an iron bed. A few pieces of furniture and a heap of clothes and bedding were piled together a little distance away, and women came from the barn and carried these back with them. Mary had come for news, but she could not ask these women to stop to answer her questions. She found that they were arranging living quarters in the granary for the family until they could put up another house; so she went to work with them, and as they swept and scrubbed and made beds, they told her what little there was to tell.

The fire had been started by a spark from a burning stove pipe catching on the dry shingles of the roof. The little Petersen girl was cooking dinner and had filled the stove with dry straw. Her mother was in bed with a three-days' old baby, so there might have been worse trouble than fire if Mr. Petersen had not been working near the house. He had tried to put out the blaze with a wet blanket, but the well near the house had gone dry, and the supply of water hauled in each day had run low. When he found he could not save the house he got his wife and baby out and carried them to the barn, and in the few minutes before the

roof fell, he had saved a few pieces of furniture. But the blazing shingles were flying in the wind and starting a fresh fire wherever they fell. A brand caught in little Jenny's cotton dress, and as the flame leapt at her face he had caught and choked it in his bare hands. The flame had not come near enough to burn Jenny's face, but her father's hands!

And the young cattle in the corral! They had lost their heads and jammed themselves in the corner by the watering trough, and the burning shingles had fallen right among them. Worst of all, there was old Barney, the horse, pasturing about the house. A burning shingle had fallen across his head and caught in his forelock as he ran in the wind—and both eyes were burned. Pete Shoedecker had found him going around in a circle, blind and almost mad, they said.

Neighbours seeing the fire had come from all directions. Someone had the forethought to bring a barrel of water, and they had protected the barn and the other buildings. Men would keep watch all night to see that no spark started a fresh blaze.

It was evening before the women had the granary cleaned and set in order, and Mary, working with them, had heard a lot about the fires in the district and what had caused them and what the owners had lost. She still had to talk with Mr. Petersen to find what he had to say about it.

Once during the afternoon she had seen him among the men—the white bandages on his hands

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had marked him out—and now she walked out towards the corral to see if he might be anywhere about. It was getting dark, and off a little way in a field she saw something white moving. She would go that way and perhaps she would meet him. When she came nearer she heard a moaning and the pounding of a hoof on the earth. It was Barney rolling about on the ground, a white bandage over his eyes.

“Och, Barney!” she cried and then to herself, “Can’t they do something for him?”

But of course they would do things for him! And her temper rose at the thought of it. Blind or not, a horse was a horse, could do a horse’s work, so they would be putting him through all sorts of tortures to save his eyes, even though the sight was gone, and after that he would have to stumble through years of hard work and blindness. Someone was coming to him now. A man was crossing the field from the barn, and knowing that she was likely to say what was neither diplomatic nor logical at a time like this, Mary stayed where she was, in the shadows. But she would see what they did. If it was necessary, she would let them know that there was such a thing as a humane society, and that she would not hesitate to report them.

As he came nearer, the man spoke to the horse and she was strangely relieved. This was someone who knew animals and had pity for them. He bent down and stroked the horse’s neck and the animal stopped threshing about and gave a low nicker.

"It's tough, old boy," the steady voice went on—and Barney turned his head as if he wanted to touch the hand that still moved quietly about his neck. "It's hard luck, but you'll be all right soon."

There was the crack of a revolver, the thud of a horse's head on the ground and a scream in the dark that must have surprised the man as much as the shot had startled the girl.

He saw her light dress through the dark then and came to her. He was very tall. He wore a shapeless old hat and overalls tucked into high boots, and his face was black with soot—the man she had seen working with the cattle that afternoon. He took off his hat and his hair was grotesquely light above his black face.

"I guess I scared you," he apologized. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know there was anyone around."

"It's all right," she told him. "I just wasn't expecting it. I feel a lot better to know the horse is out of his misery. And I shouldn't be standing around in the dark like this, but I was looking for Mr. Petersen. The editor of *The Times* sent me out to find all I could about the way the insurance companies are acting, and all that. If I could just get a farmer's own view of it——"

"We farmers sure appreciate what your paper has been doing, and I know Mr. Petersen would see you, but he's having a bad time just now—maybe you heard about him getting burned—and they've taken him and the family to a neighbour's for the

night. I suppose I couldn't tell you what you want to know? My name's Shoedecker, Pete Shoedecker. I live on the next farm here, and I've heard what most of this settlement thinks of the insurance gossip."

"Then if you'd have a few minutes to spare any time before the train goes——"

"You mean you have to wait around here till midnight? I'm driving into town to-night—have to see the 'vet' about the stock that are burned and Petersens want some things from the drug store. If you'd care to ride in with me it would save you a long wait here—that's if it doesn't take me till midnight to get cleaned up," he added with a grin of apology.

"Then you could come to the office and tell the editor what he wants to know. That would be a real scoop for us."

He brought his car around, a car that had carried loads of binder twine and implement parts, when fast trips on such errands were necessary, a car that had not been new for several years but was still doing valiant service. It had been wiped free of dust inside, and until they got to his place, Peter rode half-way out of it, so that his grimy clothes would not touch her dress. At his gate he left her in the car to wait, and through the dusk she saw a bare but orderly assembly of buildings, saw the light of a lamp appear in a window, heard a pump going and then a splashing at the rear of the house, more

pumping and more splashing, a session of quiet, and presently in the glow of the headlight a stranger appeared—a tall young man, very broad of shoulder and lean from long hard days in the fields, a young man in a blue suit a little too short at the wrists and ankles, for ready-to-wears do not cater to men whose height runs well above six feet. His fair hair had evidently been brushed flat after its wash, but it was already crinkling up in an unruly mop at the top of his head. And it was unbelievable that even soap and water could achieve that look of scrubbed cleanness after the grime of half hour ago. As a matter of fact, soap and water alone had not done it. It was a trick of Peter's own that he had learned from a garage man—a scrub with a mixture of sawdust and oil, then one lather of soap and water after another—and coming from the little wash-bench at the back of his shack, he looked as if he had just emerged from a hot pack and a cold shower.

They talked about fires and insurance and crop failures as they drove along. With the radicalism of youth, they discussed the economic problems of the time and what might be done about them. They touched, very impersonally of course, on what the present conditions meant to the young man and the young woman, and their future, and the future of the generation next to come. They exchanged their own ideals for a new social order, and Mary was surprised, and, though she scarcely knew why, happy to find that this young farmer's views,

restricted as they were by very definite convictions of what was right and what was wrong, were a little more far-seeing and tempered with a more practical sympathy, than her own. When she led him into the editor's office she had something of the pride of a hostess who has captured a social lion.

"Mr. Shoedecker," she introduced him, "Peter Shoedecker."

The editor took off his glasses as he shook hands with Peter, and looked him over with appreciation and recognition.

"Didn't you show cattle at the fair here a few years ago?" he asked. "I thought you'd be one of the leading stockmen in the West."

"I even thought that myself, once," Peter admitted.

"What happened that you quit?"

"Just couldn't afford show cattle. Couldn't even feed them the last couple of years, so I sold what I couldn't take care of. There's been a drought, you know," he grinned.

And then he answered the editor's questions about barn fires, more than answered them—went into facts and possibilities that the editor had never heard of. They talked so hard and fast that there was no room in the conversation for Mary, and when, because there seemed no good reason for staying, she began to take herself away, Peter rose too. He had not forgotten that he was seeing her home.

He would like to call at the drug store and the veterinarian's place on the way, if she wouldn't

mind, he said, just in case they might close up on him. "An awfully decent sort," he said of the veterinarian. Now that the farmers couldn't afford to send for him sometimes when they would like to, he would take no end of pains to tell them what to do themselves. (Mary guessed that Peter was the one who usually did it.) With his supplies and advice collected, he drove her home.

"Come in and we'll have something to eat," she invited him.

"O-mi-gosh!" he exclaimed. "I'd forgotten that you hadn't had any supper."

"So had I. And I suppose you'd forgotten that you hadn't had any yourself. But I don't know what we could have done about it if we had remembered. I'm starving now and I'm sure you are. Come on."

And Peter came.

While she was busy in the kitchen he waited in her sitting-room, and his eyes that missed little wherever he was, took in every bit of its softness and colour. The place stirred something of the tenderness with which he remembered his mother's flower garden. Not a large patch of flowers it was, and the plants were hardy and simple, but it was full of sweet surprises, and a fresh and fragrant spot.

He washed his hands in her cubicle of a bathroom. He stepped gingerly on the white tile with its fancy black trimming. He looked at the pink shower

curtain and looked away. He turned from the row of little towels on the rack, with their embroidered monograms and lace edges, and took from his pocket a folded blue handkerchief of his own laundering and wiped his hands on that. He saw that the tiny leaded window opened, not to the free winds of the prairie like the windows of his own little house, but into a court; and he found himself wondering if there was enough fresh air in a place like this for a girl who worked in an office all day.

They sat in her little kitchen at a table with a yellow checked cloth that matched the window curtains, and they ate hot biscuits and bacon and scrambled eggs and stewed apricots from the ice-box. And they talked, not about the fate of the world now, but about the littlest things that did not matter at all to anyone but themselves. She had made the coffee especially strong to keep him awake on the drive home, she said, and as they loitered over it the clock struck two.

He was on his feet at once, apologizing. At the door he said, "This has been a wonderful night, Mary Moran. Please don't think I'm being fresh about the 'Mary'. My folks were Quakers away back and it comes natural to me to call people by their first names. Mine's Peter—if you could manage it. And thanks for the supper and everything. If you find an awful crimp in your ice-box in the morning, comfort yourself with knowing you've given a hungry man the best meal he's had in years."

Then, halting a bit for words, but not at all confused, he added, "But more than that, it was good of you to let me come in. I hadn't known how much I've been missing the like of this."

She gave him her hand as she said good night, and he may have wondered why her eyes widened a little. She knew now why the animals lost their fear at his touch. It was so strong and kind and steady, a hard but sensitive, intelligent hand, not just a hand that could do things—though, dear knows, she had had evidence enough of that—but it seemed to have in itself a sort of understanding. It left her wondering. . . . Altogether it had been a disturbing day.

## CHAPTER II

FALL came suddenly to the West that year. One day it was summer; the next, a wind blew across the prairie, driving a leaden cold before it. Men wore their sheepskin coats to the fields; box stoves were carried in and set up in parlours; everywhere there was a drive on the last of the potato harvest, for a wind like this, after a hot summer, often brought a frost that went deep into the ground, or snow that came to stay. The snow did not come, but the year had turned a corner. The West was again facing a winter for which it was ill-prepared.

In the cities, women's clubs were laying plans for relief work, and when the Business Girls' Guild was considering its programme, Mary Moran told about the Petersen family who had lost most of their belongings and who were living in a granary until the neighbours could get a house built for them. The Guild members were ready to help, but what should they do? Could Mary write to someone and find what was most needed? Mary wrote to Peter.

And Peter wrote back that he could find out something about what was needed, but could she not come out and see for herself? They hoped to get the house finished and move the family in the

next Saturday. If she could come on the Saturday noon train, he would meet her and drive her out to the farm. Mary read the letter several times; then she wrote that she would come. After that, she read the letter again, occasionally.

Peter, huge in a sheepskin coat was waiting at the station with his sturdy, battered old car. He had come from work at the Petersen place; he was going back to work there, and he wore his working clothes—sheepskin jacket with collar turned up high about the ears, rough leather-faced corduroys tucked into lumber-jack's boots, a leather cap and mittens. He looked ready for any weather, and comfortable. When he opened the car door for Mary, he reached inside and brought out an overcoat.

"I thought that would be about all you town folks would know about our winters out here," he said as he helped her into it.

He hadn't seemed to look beyond the collar of her light tweed suit, but when he tucked the rug around her he brought it low, with a thought for her thin stockings.

The Petersens' house was almost finished, he told her. The men were putting on the last of the shingles that afternoon, and not too soon, for already a rain that promised to be sleet in an hour was spattering the wind-shield. Not a bit too soon, either, for the reason that the temperature had been going down steadily since morning and it was impossible to keep the granary warm enough to live in. Mrs.

Petersen had caught a cold after the fire and was still in bed. Neighbour women were making things ready in the house and they would have them all settled in before night.

Peter drove up to the granary and they went in. On a cloudy afternoon like this, very little light came through the small windows, and for a minute Mary could not see anything at all. Then, as Peter introduced her, she took in the whole picture—the woman, thin and white, on the bed with her baby, the man, his hands still almost helpless in bandages, his face haggard and unshaven, a little girl muffled up in a man's sweater, keeping shyly in the background. A length of stove pipe hung by a wire from the ceiling with a pile of soot on the floor below it, and a sputtering oil stove filled the room with its fumes. It was no new experience for Mary to drop in on cheerless, poverty-ridden homes in her relief surveys of city families, but she had not expected anything like this in the country.

"I see they've taken your stove," said Peter. "I'll see if I can give them a hand at getting a fire in it," and he went off cheerful and, Mary was sure, equal to whatever had to be done. She could imagine his dealing with the stove pipes—a scrutiny of the edges, a tap here and a push there, until they knew they had met their master. But he did not seem at all depressed by the sordidness of living like this, and for some reason it troubled her. It didn't matter, of course, how bad things were, if only

you were sufficiently disturbed by them to want to make them better; but Peter seemed to take living like this as a matter of course, was as pleasant as if he had stepped into a comfortable home with things as they should be. . . . And if he should appear anywhere but here in the country, in clothes like he was wearing to-day, what would he look like!

Mrs. Petersen apologized, not for the disorder of the room, but for the possibility that her visitor might be cold, and Mr. Petersen set the evil-smelling oil stove closer to her. She asked about his burns and he said everything was fine. In a week or two he could have the bandages off and his hands wouldn't be crippled—except just a little.

"But, oh, that was a close call," he continued, "for our little girl, I mean, if I'd been a second later. . . ." He turned away and walked to the window and back. "If she'd been a yard farther away from me, the flames would have got to her face and she'd have been scarred, dear knows how badly.

"We were lucky," he went on, still moving restlessly about. "Nothing that we lost matters. There was a whole day after the fire when they told me the wife wouldn't live." His voice broke there. He stood at the window, his back to the room; reached for his handkerchief and had difficulty getting it from his pocket with his bandaged hands. And Mary had a bad minute knowing that she had misjudged him because—with his shattered nerves

and crippled hands—he hadn't shaved that day or the day before.

The door opened and the huge, rough bulk of Peter in his sheepskin loomed in the half light.

"I think we're ready for you now," he said—he was speaking to the woman on the bed; speaking with the encouraging matter-of-factness of a doctor who knows that his patient is a bit nervous about what is ahead of her. "We'll just take you, pretty much bed and all, so you'll hardly know you're moving."

And with the assured deftness with which he seemed to do everything, he gave the bedding a tuck in on one side, then on the other, lifted her as easily as if she were a child and as carefully as if she had a broken back, and started to the house. Mary gathered up the baby, with some advice from Jenny, and they all followed along.

The men nailing shingles on the roof stopped their work as they came near. The woman had been very sick—could she stand the noise of their hammers? They waited uncertainly for a few minutes after she was in the house, then one of them came to the door to ask if it would be all right to go on—they could finish the roof in half-an-hour.

"Of course, yes," she told him, and her thin face glowed. "I don't think anything could sound better than nails going into a roof over our heads." Then she turned her face to the wall and cried. She had her family back in a house again, a little house

of two rooms, but it had a warm fire and beds to sleep in and supper on the table for everyone. Her neighbours had done it all.

Again Mary was ashamed of her lack of understanding. She had thought of these people, the whole "dried out" settlement, as a sort of unfortunate under-class needing help. They had shown a resourcefulness and a social attitude that she had not yet seen anywhere else.

And Peter—she had imagined how his rough clothes would look in a city. Probably he had no intention of wearing them to the city. She had not liked his easy acceptance of the desolate living quarters in the granary, while he was possibly trying to help the Petersens over their embarrassment at having a stranger see them in such surroundings. And he had lost no time in getting a fire started in the new house. Then she had seen his ways with the sick woman. There was a gentleness and fineness about this farmer that would mark him with the stamp of good breeding wherever he might go.

And how amazingly cheerful they all were! There had been, as the prairie farmer puts it, "no crop" that year, nor for several years before. They were worried over problems of feed to carry their stock through the winter, over bills that must be paid and the necessities of existence for themselves and their families; but when the women put the steaming supper on the table, and the men came in, and they all sat down together, there was laughter and wit

and repartee. The stock of chairs and dishes was low for such a crowd. Someone would have to sit on an upturned nail keg, someone would have to use a bowl for a tea cup; but these things bothered them not at all, nor embarrassed them before the visitor. It seemed that whoever came among them was made one of them.

The wind, rising with nightfall, roared about the little house and sleet began to peck at the windows. One or two men who had come in cars, left as soon as supper was over. The sleet was freezing and the roads would be like glass in an hour, they said.

Mary's train did not leave till eleven o'clock, and she wondered what the road to the station would be like by that time, but Peter didn't seem to be worrying about it. The neighbours who had come with horses were more leisurely in their going, but when they went out to their waggon, the wind pushed at the door and whipped into the house like a cyclone. It was colder, too, and ice was covering everything.

"You'll never get your car over the road to-night," Mrs. Petersen said to Peter when the others had gone. "Miss Moran had best just stay the night with us."

A near-panic seized Mary. She appreciated the woman's hospitality, but there was no place for a guest in the two-roomed cabin. The family could manage by themselves, but what room or privacy was there for a stranger?

"That's awfully good of you," she said, "but you should have a chance to be quiet after the moving and all the fuss to-day; you shouldn't be bothered with anyone around."

"It would be no bother," the sick woman protested, "only not very comfortable for you. But it would not be safe to take a car out to-night."

Mary felt a very real home-sickness for her own little flat, but what could she do? Then Peter was speaking to her, under cover of the noise he made pouring coal into the fire.

"You'd like to go home to-night?"

"Yes, but if it isn't safe——"

"We'll get you there," he smiled.

He put on his sheepskin and picked up his leather cap. It was still three hours till train time.

"Mind if I borrow one of your horses?" he asked Mr. Petersen.

"No. But we've nothing to hitch to, no cart or anything."

"Oh, I'll take my car to the station. I just want to ride over to Bentley's. Joe borrowed my chains last week."

Mr. Petersen opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Mary never knew that Bentley's place was four miles away.

. . . . .

The road seemed quite as dangerous as they said it would be. Sometimes the track changed suddenly

from deep, frozen ruts to a sheet of ice as slippery as wet glass, and Mary knew that a hand less quick and steady at the wheel would have let them into the ditch. Once when the wind was particularly savage, the chains lost their grip, and the car made a slow, dignified half circle in the road. Peter got out and righted it by hand; he was taking no chances. After an especially difficult stretch, when she gathered from the set of his profile that manœuvring roads like this was not easy, Mary suggested, "Hadn't we better get out and walk? It must be agony, driving."

He smiled in her direction but did not take his eyes from the road.

"You'd get your feet wet," he told her. "Besides, you're not very hefty, you know—a wind like this might carry you right off. We're all right. At the rate we're moving, we could almost roll the rest of the way without getting hurt."

But she knew that one careless second might send them hurtling over the road embankment.

When they finally drew up safe at the station, she said, "I had no idea what I was letting you in for when I said I would like to get home to-night."

"This was nothing," he laughed. "Rather a rough day all through for you, though, I'm afraid. Out here we're used to every sort of road and weather. I've been through some tight places with this old engine and she's almost as intelligent as a horse. I'm going to hate to part with her."

"You mean you're going to sell your car?"

"No; just the engine, I think. I'll be making the rest of it into a waggon or buggy, something for horses to draw. I'm going north to look for land next week and I won't need a car there."

"But your farm here . . . ?"

"I can't hold it." He spoke with the humiliation a farmer feels when he has to give up the land he thought was his own. "I could stay on for a while—the bank's awfully decent—but with five bad years running and no knowing when it will be any better, I'd rather square things away while I can. I'll still have all the stock I need to start on a homestead. But how are you getting on? Are you feeling the hard times on the paper yet? Are things going to be all right with you?"

Mary had never thought much about how things would be with herself. And now she could think of nothing but that Peter was going away, to some vague place in "the North," and he wasn't telling her where. The train was coming; their day was already over.

They seemed to have nothing to say to each other now as they waited on the station platform. Mary observed that it wasn't raining so hard and Peter thought it would clear in an hour or two. The engine roared in and stopped, its bell clanging impatiently. She gave him her hand and he held it hard, looking down into her troubled eyes.

“It’s been great knowing you even this little while,” he said. “I wish——” But he did not say what he wished. The wheels began to move and he added, “Good-bye, Mary. Take care of yourself,” and pushed her up the steps.

## CHAPTER III

“**A**RE things going to be all right with you?” Peter had asked when he told Mary how the adversities of the time had taken his farm from him. In the weeks that followed she wondered why she had never worried about this herself. Of course there had been salary cuts—everyone expected that; and the advertising columns which, as of course she knew, indicated the firm’s revenue, were little more than half what they had been two years ago, but it had not occurred to her that there might be an actual end to it all, until Mr. Dougald, the owner and editor of *The Times* called the staff together one day, and in his direct Scotch way, his gruff voice breaking here and there, told them how things stood.

In the spring *The Times* would be taken over by *The Clarion*. He had been forced to sell; could not have gone on much longer, anyway; but there would be no cutting of the staff until the end of March; he would edit the paper himself until that time and there would be work for everyone who had not found something else in the meantime. Then he and all of them would have to go. *The Clarion* would continue with its present staff. The arrangement had not been definite until that morning and

he was letting them know at once, so that they might make what plans they could; and if any of them could tighten their belts a little now, while they had something coming in, it might be all to the good later on.

He didn't suggest that better times were "around the corner." For weeks he had been lying awake nights worrying over what his staff would do when the blow fell, and he could not think where to place one of them. Young Elliot was, fortunately, a good rustler. He might even make a go of selling something on commission—about the only occupation that wanted men any more. Miss Erskine had been working for years on a fair salary; she was a good business woman and probably had enough savings to keep her going for some time. But little Mary Moran had come into her working years in unfortunate times. She had never had much of a salary, and he suspected that she gave away more of it than she could well spare. She was no business woman; not even a promising newspaper woman.

He smiled to himself, remembering the time he had gone to Chicago and left Elliot in charge of the paper for a week, with Mary to help on the general reporting. One night towards midnight, when Elliot was darting about, getting the paper to press, important as a surgeon with a major operation on his hands, and Mary handing him proofs and copy like an efficient trained nurse, someone phoned to say that a girl had been drowned in the river. Elliot

couldn't leave so he sent Mary, fairly shot her out of the office, shouting instructions about getting a photograph and this and that. He would hold the press for an hour, two hours if he had to, but it wouldn't take her that long.

An hour passed, two hours, and at two o'clock Mary had not come back. Angry and disappointed, Elliot let the issue go. About three o'clock Mr. Dougald came off the train and dropped in at the office to see how things were going, and a half hour later Mary staggered in, white and sick. She handed Elliot the girl's picture and a dozen lines of copy that she had written on the street car.

"Her mother said she'd be glad to let us have that," she said of the photograph.

"Oh, she did, did she?" the acting editor replied. He glared at the picture and threw it down, one eye running through the copy at the same time. "Well, it's too late for this issue and if there's no more story to go with it than that, I doubt if we'll want it at all. It won't be news after to-morrow. Why spend three hours to get what anyone in the house could have given you in five minutes? Looks almost as if you were holding something back on us."

"And perhaps I am," she shot back at him, her eyes swimming but her Irish temper roused. "Since it's too late for you to put it in our paper, I'll tell you what you'll probably read in *The Clarion* to-morrow, anyway. The girl was just eighteen and she threw herself into the river from the high bridge,

and she was the loveliest looking thing, and her mother's nearly crazy. *The Clarion* reporter was there and they couldn't get rid of him."

"And what were you doing all the time?"

"What anyone else would do if they went to a house where a thing like that had happened and no one seemed to be helping them. You don't understand. The girl had committed suicide—and there's a lot more to it than that."

There was a lot more to it, with the son of one of the town's leading families involved—he, too, was just eighteen—and *The Clarion* gave almost a page to it every day for a week, and sold copies to most of *The Times'* subscribers. Elliot never quite got over being scooped, but Mr. Dougald rather felt that Mary had saved them from a lapse into yellow journalism.

Still, a girl who could forget her paper for three hours and lose herself in smoothing out a family trouble that would have made good copy, would never be a star reporter. It was hard to say just what she could do, with competition as keen as it was in these times; for she had never seemed to catch on to the ambitious young woman's ways of driving a good bargain for herself either in business or socially. Altogether Mr. Dougald was worried about her.

Another person who worried about Mary was Ann Severn. Ann worked on *The Clarion*. She was thirty, smart, hard, sophisticated, fair in her

dealings usually, and fond of Mary. She was good-looking, with a genius for clothes and a love of soft living—luxurious motor cars, first nights at theatres and three-hour dinners; and in spite of the hard times, a surprising number of these things seemed to come her way. She had built up a large acquaintance of passers-through-town who liked to take a smart and witty woman out to dance or dine.

"What are you going to do?" Ann asked Mary. "I wish we had a place for you on *The Clarion* but there isn't a chance in the world. Have you thought of anything at all?"

"I've thought of quite a lot of things but only one of them seems at all hopeful."

"And what is that?"

"Housework."

Ann wasn't as surprised at this as she would have been a year ago, but her face registered more sympathy than was tactful if Mary should have to go through with it. And Mary laughed, a laugh that was almost real.

"You'd be surprised how useful I am around a house," she said; but it was plain she wasn't taking it as a lark or as something to tide over a few months until things would be back to normal again. There was something wrong with the child, Ann decided.

"These days are hard for bairns like you. You're not having a very good time, are you?" she queried. "But how could you, with every boy in town out of work and socially out of circulation? Oh, I know,

the churches and the women's clubs make parties 'so that the young folks can get together,' but how do the boys behave, if they come at all? Like so many sulky youngsters who have been made to go to a party. They're embarrassed over the whole thing. Boys want to pick out their own girls and pay for their entertainment. It leaves girls, young like yourself, as short of beaux as if they were spinsters of forty. Tell me, do you know one young man in this town who has lost a way of earning his living and has kept his morale?"

"Not in *this town*," Mary admitted, and hoped to goodness Ann wouldn't ask what she meant. She was thinking of a man who had lost everything he had worked for for years, and who was starting at the beginning again without fear or self-pity—a harder beginning than the first, for it was one thing to break land on an open prairie and another to clear the bush from every acre before the plough could be put to it at all. But one somehow expected that of a person like Peter. He was different. And she was ashamed and angry at herself, that she could not forget a man who did not care enough to more than casually mention that he was going away.

Ann did not notice anything in what Mary said, to arouse her curiosity, but she did see that in spite of her attempts at cheerfulness, the heart had gone out of her. Perhaps she could help her to "snap out of it."

So one day she telephoned.

"Do you know anything about a 'blind date,' Mary?"

Mary's laugh rippled over the phone—a laugh that wasn't quite real any more.

"A little, by hearsay," she said.

"Then you know what I mean. Well, Bert Evans is in town and he ran into a friend at the hotel, Chris Carter, I think he called him, from Chicago, and they want to take us out to dinner."

"Us? Don't forget I met your Mr. Evans at the Press dance last winter. He and any friend of his from Chicago don't want to listen to my dinner talk or the lack of it. Get Jane Eckhart or someone like that. But thanks for thinking of me; it's a compliment."

"No. It's you we want, Mary. It'll be fun. Don't worry about this Carter. He'll probably be more afraid of you than you are of him. It'll be good for you. You aren't yourself lately at all. Try to forget about jobs and things. You can't tell what may happen before spring."

So Ann had noticed. Perhaps other people did, too. She would go to the dinner and try to be interested; maybe it would help, but the thought of it was ashes in her mouth.

She felt better when she got into her party dress, a rusty, rose-coloured thing that made her hair darker and her eyes browner and somehow warmed her spirits—the sort of dress that could go to a dinner or a dance or with a few adjustments to a

formal afternoon, and look both demure and sophisticated at the same time.

Chris Carter wasn't afraid of her as Ann had suggested he might be. He was unnecessarily good-looking and very sure of himself. Before the dinner was over he was calling her Mary—and she was remembering that Peter had done that too, the first night she met him. Only with Peter it had been different. . . . "Please don't think I'm being fresh about the 'Mary.' My folks were Quakers and it comes natural to call people by their first names."

Thinking of Peter she smiled back at Chris Carter; nothing that he said bothered her now. Except that she must try to play up to his banter, he wasn't there at all. So far as Ann could see, her little party was a huge success. She was glad this Carter was so good-looking and so amusing—or so Mary seemed to be finding him. She would see to it that she didn't see too much of him.

A few weeks later, Carter was in town again but Ann didn't know it. It was really winter now, and Mary, with scores of other working girls, was spending her evenings calling on out-of-work families, checking up for churches and service organizations. She was leaving on one of these expeditions one night when her telephone rang and Carter was on the line. He was both lonely and hungry, he said, and he wanted her to get into the little red frock and have dinner with him. But she couldn't, she told him; she was going out; and he said not to let that matter;

he would call for her in half an hour. And then she told him just why she couldn't. It was the last night for listing families for a certain benefit, and so on . . . she was very much in earnest about it.

After a second of silence he said rather coolly, "Aren't you rather young to be so given to good works?"

Mary's face burned, seeing herself as he saw her—a stirring young woman full of business and important about it.

"I must have sounded pretty bad," she apologized. "I didn't mean that I . . . everyone's working at it. You see we have five hundred families starving in this city."

"And China has about that many million, I believe. Will you be starting on them next? It's all right. Go to it if you feel that way. It just isn't my idea of spending a pleasant evening, that's all."

It wouldn't be, she thought, sitting at her little desk for a minute, staring at the telephone and seeing another man, younger than Chris Carter, and just as good-looking. Indeed he was, she defended, thinking of his great height, his bright, unruly hair, his ready grin and his blue eyes that were so keen and so honest and so kind. And when his neighbours were in trouble he was right there doing something about it. Most clearly of all she saw Peter's big, work-hardened, careful hands lifting a sick woman. . . . She put on her hat and went out.

Ann tried again. For Mary was still preoccupied, still not herself at all. She was white and thinner, too, but that might be because she wasn't getting the meals she should have; girls sometimes took the most foolish ways of saving money.

This time the diversion was a safe and solid man, a traveller given to service clubs and business promotion. He sold haberdashery, and wore it, and talked about it. His conversation kept finding its way back to plans for new styles that would increase trade. And Mary thought of a worn blue suit, shiny from much wear and frequent pressing, a little short at the wrists and ankles; and she wanted to ask this stylist if something couldn't be done so that men who were built on the lines of the old time knights, but who couldn't afford made-to-order clothes, could get extra lengths in ready-to-wears. She wondered if new styles of wearing apparel would stimulate trade enough to lift the country out of its depression. It didn't seem so practical as taking an axe and going into the Northern woods, since the South had failed, and wresting a living from the new land.

"It's no use," she said when Ann suggested another party. "Nights out don't minister to a mind disturbed. I've got to face up to what's ahead of me, and try to find something to do when *The Times* closes." And Ann admitted to herself that the schemes she had tried hadn't seemed to help much.

So Mary set to work on her budget which was

already a masterpiece of economy. Her one remaining extravagance was the apartment and the lease did not run out till March so she had to keep it anyway. At night she studied the Help Wanted advertisements and was alarmed to see how even the demand for domestic servants was decreasing. There was the fear of homelessness too, to trouble her. Being an orphan with no relatives had never worried her until now. She had lots of friends and her little flat, small as it was, had been a shelter and a sanctum. Already it seemed to be scarcely her own any more. The agent had asked if he might occasionally bring a prospective tenant to see the rooms, and since then he seemed to be using her place to sell every apartment in the building. She had had the telephone taken out, and she never knew when he would be dropping along with a customer. He was very nice about it, scarcely bringing his prospect past the door, but whenever he came Mary realized afresh that this was no bad dream from which she would presently waken.

This prospect of homelessness was bearing in heavily, when one night in December, she came in out of a windy, biting cold, put the kettle on the stove and sat down to see what the employment advertisements offered. There was a knock at the door and she went wearily to admit the agent. And there was Peter.

"Why—why Peter!" she said, and was afraid for a minute that she was going to cry. Then he

was inside and looking at her closely but asking no questions.

"I thought I'd get to the office before you left," he explained, "and Mr. Dougald told me you hadn't a telephone, so I took a chance on coming right up. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," she told him, and something in her heart was singing. It was strange how just having him there could set everything right. "Take off your coat and I'll get our supper."

"No, you come out with me this time. My train goes at midnight, and I have so much to talk to you about, that I don't want you to be bothered with cooking supper or with anything but me."

This was a different Peter. There was a new aggressiveness about him. While she was busy in the little dressing-room that had only a curtain for a door, he moved restlessly about the sitting-room, examining one thing and another. Once, she was sure she saw him fold up a carpenter's rule and put it in his pocket. And as she brushed her hair and slipped on the rusty dress, and tried as she had never tried before to make herself beautiful, he talked from across the room, in the most free and easy way. It seemed a bit strange at first; then it was delightfully comfortable.

He had been up North, he told her, and had taken a homestead; had put up a barn and a shack and had come back for his stock and implements. They were down on the railroad siding now, the

usual settler's carload, and the train would leave at midnight.

When he was ready he was quick to take her coat and help her into it.

"Gosh, that's a pretty dress," he told her. "If I should have said you look lovely in it, I didn't because you are that all the time anyway."

She turned and looked him over in mock severity.

"You wouldn't have been drinking, would you Peter?"

He roared at that.

"What sort of a place is this North?" she went on. "It's done something to you."

He sobered quickly and said very quietly. "I'm afraid that was done before I left here. Ready?"

It was terribly exciting, going out with Peter, just walking out on a bitter, cold night to a supper at a restaurant somewhere. It was good to feel his hand under her elbow, to have him swing his great body between her and the wind while they waited for lights at street crossings.

And she was so proud of him. When he had settled her at a table and had hung up his overcoat and come back to her, she would have liked to say to the haberdashery salesman, "Now there's a model for you—six feet and more, sun-tanned and wind-burned, shoulders sorely trying the breadth of standard-made clothes." The blue serge was as short at the wrists as it had always been, but it had been pressed within an inch of its life. His hair

with its high lights and shadows in the crinkles—it was funny that it always reminded her of a little boy's hair—was, she decided, just the colour of ripe wheat blowing in the wind. And there was that something of rugged cleanness about him, from his lean, hard hands and strong, white teeth, to the straight, clear look in his eyes.

After supper Peter suggested a picture show but Mary thought she would rather hear more about the North country, so they went back to her rooms and he told her more. But the farther he got, the more he seemed to lose his aplomb, and he still had a long way to go. He glanced at the clock; it was ten and he must leave at eleven. Mary got up to put her kettle on the fire and he rose too.

"No, please," he begged. He drew her back into her chair and swung his own around to face her. "I was just thinking I have still so much I want to say to you." He took her hands as they lay in her lap, smiled a bit ruefully and said, "Prepare for the worst, Mary, for I'm going to ask you to marry me. I've wanted to ever since the first night I saw you, but I wanted to begin at the beginning and do everything I could to make you feel that marrying me wouldn't be so bad as it must look to you now. But I was losing my farm and had no place to take anyone; haven't anything yet but a bush farm. I know it's asking a lot of a girl like you to start from scratch on a homestead in the woods, and I wouldn't be asking you now,

only to-night Mr. Dougald told me about the paper going to close down in the spring—and I wondered if you wouldn't marry me then?"

She could not say what she wanted to say just then; something was pounding away in her throat and her voice was not to be depended on. But when a girl is Irish her tongue is never quite helpless.

"But that would be carrying your relief work too far, Peter. You can't go marrying girls to save them from starving."

He smiled back but he was having none of her levity.

"I know this sure is no way to court a girl," he said, "—see her three times and ask her to marry you—but if you'd take a chance on it, I'd make that up to you, after. It's a rough country, but if you can put up with that, and with doing without some of the things you've been used to, until we can get them—I can promise you everything else will be all right."

And she told him, "Whatever it's like, the roughness and the things we would have to do without, don't matter. I'd rather live there with you than anywhere else without you."

At the door, as he was leaving, he looked back at the little room with its soft lights and steam heat; at the door leading to the tiled kitchen with its hot and cold taps and electric stove and ice-box.

It all seemed to him the acme of luxury and comfort, and he thought of the log cabins at this time of the year in the frozen North. Of course he liked the cold and the woods, but it was not a woman's country. He looked down at Mary and she seemed so little; for all her gallantry so ill-equipped to fend for herself; so unquestioning in her giving, and he said,

"Maybe I oughtn't to have crowded you like this, but if you feel, when spring comes, that it would be—too much like coming among all strangers—don't feel you have to come because you promised. But you wouldn't walk out on me without giving me a chance to try again, would you?"

"I'll still want to come, in the spring," she said.

## CHAPTER IV

THE train jolted to a stop and Mary wakened. She had left the city the night before and transferred to the branch line at midnight. Now the grey light at the window told her it was morning. She pushed up the blind and looked out on an entirely new country. It had been spring on the prairie; the crocuses were pushing through the sod, and though there were still frosts at night, the sun was warm at midday. Here the snow was still white on the ground, and instead of open prairie a solid, swampy-looking wood crowded close to the tracks. . . . In an hour she would meet Peter at "the Junction". They would be married there, would take another train for another forty miles to Elkton which was the end of the line, and from there they would drive sixteen miles to his homestead.

It did not seem strange to be coming part way to meet Peter—not really. He had intended to come to the city for her, of course, but it would be awkward for him to leave the farm overnight just now, for he had sheep, and the day she had set for their wedding came right in lambing time.

And careful as he might be, she knew the trip would cost more than he could afford. Following

the building of their house, as he had asked in his letters how she wanted this and that, Mary had been quick to see that he would need every spare dollar he had to meet the cost of it. He was still living in the shack he had put up when he took the homestead. This shack, he said, would be a woodshed when the new house was ready, but he wouldn't move in until she came. He had sent, for her approval, paint charts and pictures of floor oil-cloth from a mail-order catalogue. He had drawn a pencil sketch of the living-room with spaces blocked in for the furniture almost exactly as it was in her flat. She knew now what he had been doing when she saw him going about her room with a carpenter's rule. Peter seemed to see things a long way ahead.

When she asked if she might bring what furniture she had, he sent a man, whom he knew, in town, to crate and ship it.

"It will cost you about as much to ship it as it would to buy new," his friend wrote, and Peter wrote back that he felt it was well for people, when they went pioneering, to take as much of civilization as they could with them. His grandmother had brought an old walnut bureau with her from the Old Land. It was a cumbersome thing to bring across the ocean, but it had given her something to live up to in the woods of Pennsylvania, and the women of the family had been proud of it ever since. And if Mary found some of her own things

in the house when she came, maybe she would feel more at home.

Mary had suggested selling her piano and putting the money into more necessary furniture, but he would not have that. The piano should come, too. But he would have to store it in town until it was safe to bring it over the roads. Roads in the North were rather bad in the spring.

But if it did not seem altogether strange to be coming to meet Peter, Mary did find the country strange. Where the trees grew tall and heavy, they were especially beautiful after the dearth of trees on the prairie; but those miles and miles of thick, scrubby bush that must be cleared, acre by acre, before the land could be laid open to the sun and the plough—there was something sinister about that. How long, she wondered, would it take to clear an acre or ten acres? Would a man as young as Peter, be old before he really had a farm; and would he be bent and broke from the labour of it? She smiled to herself, thinking how impossible it was to imagine Peter either bent or broken; then how unbelievably wonderful that he would be with her in half-an-hour, and from this to a bit of panic at the thought that very soon after that she would be his wife.

The trainman came through the car and called the Junction. If only that little beating in her throat would stop, so she could be natural! But it did not stop; it got worse. She took out her mirror to

powder her nose and was startled to find that she looked even more frightened than she felt.

From the top of the steps she saw Peter waiting, his eyes and his smile and his quick stride across the platform, an eager welcome; but when she tried to smile back the smile went all wrong. She stumbled towards him and then—of all things!—she was crying against his coat and his arm was tight about her and he was patting her shoulder and saying things to set her right. Of all the people she knew, Peter could say the most with the fewest words.

They had breakfast at a clean little hotel where the proprietor asked Peter where he came from, and if the settlers were coming in fast to those parts, and how the cattle had wintered, and he asked no questions about Mary. He understood. Many a young homesteader came to the Junction to be married.

They walked up the main street to the minister's house, and in a few minutes the simple ceremony was over. The minister's wife had the tact needful in her calling and the hospitality of the West. She supposed they had errands to do while they were in town and little time to spare, as the train went out at two o'clock, but would they come back for lunch? (She was letting them have the first hour to themselves.)

Would they come back! It was a bit of graciousness that gave an unexpected social warmth to their

day. But as Peter steered his wife to the street, he was feeling sorry for her.

"It sure was asking a lot to have you come up here by yourself and be rushed off a train and married inside an hour," he said. "You should have had an organ and flowers and your friends and everything."

"But it was a lovely wedding," she protested. "And who but a woman in a little bare manse like that would have invited two strangers back to lunch?"

"It was friendly," he agreed. But the "little bare manse" troubled him a little. He wondered what Mary would think of her own house when she saw it. Not that she would complain or feel that she had been tricked into something she did not understand. A glow of mingled pride and humility swept over him every time he remembered her saying, "Whatever it's like I'd rather live there with you than anywhere else without you," for he knew that it was the truth. But he wanted to make it up to her.

They came to what looked like a florist's window in a grocery store. Hot-house flowers did not come to the Junction every day, but lately the storekeeper had been bringing them in on Saturdays for the churches and a few customers who could afford them. To-day, in the middle of the window there was a green pail filled with sunset roses, dewy, fresh young things still in bud, the petals opening just enough to show the yellow and rusty gold

inside. Peter went in and bought the lot. "Your bridal bouquet," he explained, when he came out with the long green box under his arm. But at the station when he had her bags to attend to, and all the rest of the way home, she carried the flowers herself. Driving through the bush, over the breaking-up roads, she held them carefully, even when she was sure everything else was slipping from the waggon.

For the roads were pretty bad in spots—not for the first few miles after they left the town; the farms here had been settled for twenty years or more and were cleared in broad stretches with only a wood lot left here and there. There were big barns and solid, comfortable-looking houses, and the road had been built up and levelled year after year until now, even in April, the rubber tyres of the waggon scarcely made a dent.

They made easy riding, those tyres. Like other farmers all over the West, when he abandoned his automobile Peter had kept the wheels and had fitted a light waggon box above them. It was loaded at the back like a moving van with Mary's trunks and supplies from the stores for themselves and their neighbours—whoever went to town shopped for the whole settlement—but the seat at the front was comfortable enough, for the first ten miles or so. By this time they were in the woods and progress was slower. The frost was still in the ground in places; in others there were water-holes so deep

that the waggon seemed to plunge its nose straight down into them. There would be a dip, a spring and a lurch, and with a great splash the horses would be out on solid ground again and preparing to go into another hole. Sometimes Peter had to put brush across a spot that had thawed since he went over it that morning.

The last mile was over a bush trail that wound in and out among the trees and up and down little hillocks—a beautiful road with the late afternoon sun breaking through here and there. When they came to a piece of high ground the road-bed was solid; in the hollows the mud holes were blacker and more forbidding than any on the highway. This swampiness, Peter said, was usually a bit depressing to newcomers from the prairie, but it disappeared as the land was cleared. And they would soon be home. His place—their place—was just around the next bend.

Suddenly the woods opened. The horses turned into a little clearing and Mary saw before her a squat log building, a barn evidently, with some cattle browsing at a straw stack in a corral beside it. They turned again to avoid a pile of logs and on a little rise of ground was a log house. The barn looked unfinished, as indeed it was; the loft would have to be built above it before there was a crop to harvest and store. But the house seemed surprisingly complete, considering that the logs had even been felled since Peter came here in the

fall. They were peeled and white, the logs, and the shingles were still white from the mill, yet unweathered as the building was, it looked comfortably at home, as if it belonged here, with two sturdy poplars standing guard not far from the door, and the woods, from which its timbers had come, making a shelter back of it.

"How ever did you manage the trees?" Mary asked.

"Pure luck," he told her. "Mostly the trees are brittle from fire or not rooted firmly enough to stand alone, so you have to cut everything and plant saplings where you want them, but these are solid as rocks."

He slipped the reins over a post and went with her up the path to the door. It was not locked. He pushed it open, swept her up in one arm and set her down inside.

"I read in a book that that was the thing to do," he grinned. "Don't want to miss any of the frills we can have. I'll make a fire first thing. I bet you're frozen."

But the room was warm and there was a fire banked up in the stove.

"Joe's made a fire before he went home, Joe Olsen, the boy on the next quarter," he explained. "He comes and does the chores when I'm away. His mother makes bread for me," he added, indicating a basket on the table. "That will be this week's baking."

It was more than a baking of bread. She had put in a bowl of cottage cheese and a roast chicken, wrapped in a coarse, snow white piece of old linen.

"Does everyone up here do things like this?" Mary asked. "That minister's wife at the Junction was so nice to us, and now this——"

"You find a lot of it in a new country," he said. "Or maybe they're feeling especially sorry for you."

"They needn't," she told him, her head high. "I'm not feeling a bit sorry for myself."

He caught her to him then, brushed back her hair, gave her a pat and let her go. He was still a little afraid of her, and more fearful that he might frighten her. She was his wife, incredible as it seemed, but she had seen him just three times before to-day.

"Now if you'll make yourself at home while I put in the horses," he said, with the air of the host of the place, "I'll rustle some grub and we'll have our supper in a few minutes. You'll want to put your things away."

He opened the door to the sitting-room, the room they had planned together in their letters.

"Oh, isn't this like home!" she cried, looking away from the mud-chinked walls and the rough board floor where it was not covered by the oilcloth rug, to the chairs and tables and bookshelves placed just as they had been in her own room.

"I'll get the walls plastered or boarded as soon as I can," he promised. "They seem pretty rough to you as they are."

"But the logs are lovely. I have an Indian print, a bedspread, all rust and blue that I'll use on that wide space—if the neighbours won't think I don't know better than to hang my washing indoors."

"Don't worry about the neighbours. No doubt they'd like it."

"And the linoleum looks even better than it did in the catalogue, like flagstones under your feet. Peter, this place must have cost you more than you could afford. And the work you've put into it!"

"I only wish I'd had more money to spend on it. The work I liked."

She must examine the bookshelves he had built, and the stair rail and spindles that he had carved from "two-by-fours" and odd mill pieces. She knew that many an hour at night had gone into this handwork.

Peter opened another door and set her bags inside. There was nothing familiar here but a chest of drawers and a mirror. At one corner an open door showed a second room, little larger than a closet, with shelves and hangers and a slightly scarred mirror over a little table.

"I thought you might like this extra place for your own," he stammered. "We add rooms to suit ourselves when we're building here; we have all the ground we want and timber just for the cutting."

"I don't need all this space for myself," she said, busily opening and closing drawers, looking at the view from the window. "Where do you keep your things?"

"I haven't moved in from the shack. I wanted things to be new for you. I have an old bureau there."

"But isn't there room for it here?"

"I allowed for it, hoping——" he smiled.

They had supper in the kitchen with a wood fire roaring in the new range and the last light of the sun pouring in at the window. Peter hadn't a tablecloth but Mary brought one from her chest, a gay yellow and white square of linen, and she put the roses Peter had given her in a jug of water and set them where they would catch the sunlight. She put Mrs. Olsen's chicken on a platter at Peter's place for carving—they were going to give some dignity to this first meal in their own house.

There was a second's uncertain pause when they sat down, then Peter asked a blessing, the one he had heard his father use in their home back in the East, and that had been handed down from his grandfather and a long line of Shoedeckers before that. He had made no ceremony of the hurried and lonely meals of his bachelor years. His grandfather who had brought the simple household prayer from Holland had died before Peter was born and his father was only a memory, but when-

ever or wherever a Shoedecker set up a home, the family traditions persisted.

After supper, when he had gone out to attend to the sheep, Mary washed the dishes; then she explored the house. As a complete house it was strangely small. She was used to limited quarters in the city, but her living space there had always been part of a big building or part of a row of buildings. This little house standing by itself in the heart of the woods, seemed terribly alone and defenceless. The Olsens' house, on the next quarter, Peter said was less than half a mile away, but of course it couldn't be seen for trees. It would be different when the land was cleared—but when would that be? Thinking of the miles of solid bush she had passed in coming here, it seemed that it would take generations of men with axes and ploughs to make a countryside of open fields and neighbouring farm houses. She was not sure whether she liked these masses of trees or feared them. Anyway there was a beauty about them at this hour with their pointed tops etched against the pink of the sky.

It was almost dark now, and Peter had not come in. He would need a light. So she took the lantern from the wall and lighted it, slipped into Peter's old coat and went to the barn. The sheep pen was a log building not difficult to locate, for there were windows cut in the wall and left open for light and air, and from these came the excited treble bleatings

of the lambs and the low, short maternal answers of their mothers; and as she came nearer, she could hear Peter talking to them.

He looked up, startled, when she came in.

"Anything wrong?" he wanted to know.

"I just thought you'd be needing the lantern."

He looked at her and smiled his slow smile that was both comradely and paternal.

"I do need it," he said, "but I never thought of my wife starting to run such errands for me. This will be something to remember, but don't make a habit of it. Any married woman will tell you that a man is spoiled easily. He took the lantern and hung it on a peg. "Now that you're here, would you like to see the lambs?"

He led her along a passage to the pens where the new lambs and their mothers were kept. The ewes were nervous and afraid of Mary, and cried out when she leaned over the bars to touch their lambs; but they let Peter take them up in his hands without protest. And the lambs, little, spindling things, with their innocent eyes and enormous flopping ears, eloquent as the tail of a dog, made absurd little bleats of content when he held them.

There was one lamb, smaller than the rest, with a funny black face and timid eyes. "A disgrace to the flock, so far as size goes," Peter remarked, "but he seemed so sure of me, I hadn't the heart to get rid of him. He's one of three and the others sort of crowd him out, so he has to have a

special session at meal-time if he's to get along at all."

The stunted lamb stood off in a corner of the stall while his sturdier brothers frisked about their mother. Peter stepped over the partition and lifted them into a pen by themselves.

"Come on, Goliath, it's your turn now," he encouraged, and when the mite still shrank back in the corner, afraid of the stranger, he picked it up, brought it to its mother and held it there until its ridiculous little braced legs, its bunting head and swishing tail, told that it had forgotten its fear in the satisfaction of its hunger.

When they were ready to leave, Peter turned back for a last visit to the lambing pens.

"You'd better stay here with the light," he said. "The ewes are a little nervous." As he scattered fresh straw about, he talked to them and they answered him.

Outside the building Mary caught her breath in wonder. The whole sky was alive with dancing lights—a glory of colour that changed from icy blue to dazzling yellow and purple and wine and rose. She had seen Northern lights before, of course, but never a rainbow spectacle like this. Peter had not outgrown the wonder of it either.

"It's fine that you like things like this," Peter said. "They may help to make up for some of what I'm afraid you're going to miss. . . . It was great of you to come and take a chance on what you'd

find. What would your friends in town think if they could see you now? Or what did they think anyway of you coming to the woods to marry a man you'd seen three times?"

She looked from the blazing sky and the black woods to the log house with the poplars standing guard and a light in the window and white smoke rising from the chimney.

"I don't know that anyone thought much about it," she considered, "but I could tell them now that I think I would know a man better after seeing him for ten minutes in a sheep-fold than after ten years around bridge tables and golf clubs."

And some time later, when Ann Severn, concerned for her happiness, wrote suggesting, not too tactfully, that times were a little better with *The Clarion* and if she ever found the wilderness too wildersome, they might be able to make a place for her, Mary replied with equal candour.

"Why is it, I wonder, that we are so ready to believe that life in new places is always crude and hard? Our little cabin with never another house in sight and the woods standing deep all around it, is a sanctuary, the kindest place I have known in all my grown-up years. And Peter? Well, when a man as practical as Peter, and with a Shoedecker background, promises to honour and cherish a woman—or whatever it is they promise—there's an everyday, to the-end-of-the-world literalness about it."

She looked for a minute at what she had written, then folded it and slipped it into the fire. In the letter that she sent to Ann, she said, "I'm completely, unreasonably happy. Come and see for yourself."

## CHAPTER V

ON Sunday the Shoedeckers' neighbours came to visit them—Hans Olsen and his wife, the Eraschucks who were Ukrainians, and Pierre Joliette and the vivacious and motherly Mrs. Joliette. They already considered Peter an old friend and they were ready to welcome his wife as they were to welcome any newcomer to the neighbourhood. And it was very evident that they enjoyed a "visit" with one another. After the first awkward minutes of meeting Mary, their tongues flew.

The witty Joliette and Hans Olsen made quite a business of their repartee. The men had been talking of some abandoned homesteads in the district and Pierre observed:

"Dey don' get de right settler' for dem place. Frenchman de man for de bush. Geeve heem axe—four, five year', he mak' heemse'f good home."

"A Dane," drawled Hans, "would make hiss own axe."

The women, warmed by Mary's interest in whatever they had to say of the country she had come to, fell to reminiscing of their own early pioneering. Mrs. Olsen had had some experience of bush farming in Northern Ontario, before she came to the West. She had been married soon after she came to Canada.

It was in early spring and when Hans took her to their first log house in a clay bush country, the mud was so deep that she was afraid to step outside the door in case she might sink beyond her depth. But she thought she had never heard anything so lovely as the steady whispering of the pines about the cabin.

"You were just marr-ee'," the astute Mrs. Joliette put in. "Dat's de tam for pioneer. Een ten, twenty year, mebbey dem sam' pine' w'isper, w'isper—drive you craz-ee."

The Ukrainian woman's experience was like a bit from a story book. When she was three years old her father, a new settler from Russia, had arrived in Saskatchewan with eight children and fifty cents. They went at farming on a prairie homestead, and she could remember the rejoicing in the family when they got their first cow and later their first team of horses.

There were no schools in the district and when the girls were old enough to "work out," the mounted police came and gave them escort to Regina. When she was nine years old she went with the rest "to mind a baby" for a woman in the city and incidentally to spend some little time in school. When she was fifteen she came back and married John Eraschuck, the young Ukrainian who had taken the homestead next to her father's.

For weeks at a time she held down the claim while her young husband went to work on the

roads to make some ready money. Between times they both worked on the land, and in a few years—for these were years of good crops on the rich, new soil of the prairie—they had most of their land growing wheat and a sale for it as fast as they could get it to the market. They were almost rich in those times.

And how she described the ripened wheat-fields of the prairie!

"When the wind blows it is just like the ocean,"<sup>3</sup> she said. "I have never worked anywhere else so hard as I have worked in the harvest field and I have never enjoyed any other work so much. I could stook and keep up to an eight-foot binder. Of course I went sometimes to the house to see how the children were doing and I would get behind then; but after supper when I had put them to bed, and John had the chores done, we would go out together and stook wheat in the moonlight. Oh, I know of nothing so good as stooking wheat in the moonlight! He would take two sheaves and I would take two, and we would stand them together. . . . I don't know—perhaps in our young life that had something to do with it."

She paused for a minute and Mary found herself still listening. This was no peasant woman, one with the soil and scarcely lifting her eyes from it. She was a philosopher and a poet.

"I don't work in the fields any more," she went on presently. "Now that the boys are grown up

they will not hear of it. Mister will not, either, now, but it was the custom then as we both knew it, and you had to work to get ahead, just starting."

"I always say ef'ry woman should go by her own strength," Mrs. Olsen contributed; perhaps she was afraid Mary would think that stooking wheat would be expected of her in this country, "but I t'ink if people yust yump in according as t'ey are able, an' work hard, an' t'ink nice t'oughts, t'ey will be werry much happier'n lots are now."

They must leave before dark, they said—"with the roads so full of water holes and the moon not up till late," so they had supper with the last light of the sun making a cheery place of the kitchen, and talk still running free and friendly. And they left urging Peter to "bring the wife and come over" just as soon as he could get away, when all the lambs had come.

They were driving out of the yard when Mrs. Olsen made Hans stop. She had forgotten her rubbers, she said, and she climbed out of the waggon and came back to the house. She did not explain to Peter as she passed him, and when Mary met her at the door she reddened and stammered a little.

"I t'ought did I left my rubbers, but I guess I neffer bring t'em. . . . I was yust t'inking . . . you like my breat. If you haffn't make breat—city woman she says no call to—and if you would like my way for try, yust come up any time or I

come ofer an' show you. The neighbours will neffer know I teaching you."

"Bless your heart," said Mary. "Indeed I'll come."

Peter came in from seeing them off.

"Quite a party for your first day here," he said.

"A very nice party," she agreed. "And didn't we have conversation?"

"Have what? Oh, yes. Yes, they're good company. And nothing but good to say of everyone. There's one family here not so neighbourly—the Whittons, but they keep to themselves pretty much, and no one pays much attention to anything they say. He's been very mean with the family and their stepmother isn't much better I guess. The girl, Dora, ran away last fall.

"But there are other nice people around. Jim Irwin—he's an Englishman—lives alone on a quarter four miles east. He's no farmer but he has an income from the Old Country. Plays the violin. He'll be calling but he'll wait till he thinks you've had time to get settled.

"Then there's Mrs. Meadows—Jane Meadows everyone calls her. She came North years ago when there was land to homestead close to town, so she has a fine place there now. Her husband died some years ago, then her daughter, just when she'd finished college, but Jane stayed right on; says she'd be more lonely anywhere else. She's getting on, now, but she hires help and runs her farm well. Of

course she isn't in this neighbourhood but she takes a great interest in all the homesteaders. She'll be out to see you when the roads clear up, or I'll take you to see her. She's a sort of Mother in Israel to the whole district—a great woman.

“And Mrs. Ritchie and her two boys have a place back in the bush. They've had a hard time. Her husband died, down South, when the 'flu was around the last time; then the drought came and they lost their farm and she came up here and homesteaded. The neighbours made bees and did her clearing for the first few years, but Jack is about eighteen now. The younger boy is crippled.”

But Mary met most of the neighbours before the next week was over.

Jim Irwin called, as Peter had expected; came striding in from the trail one day in cap and tweeds, as if he might be on his way to a golf course. He did not look like a practical, homesteading farmer. He made no pretence of being one; he seemed to be as much amused by the mistakes he made as Peter was. But under his easy sociability there was something of frustration and loneliness that few people missed. Certainly he was not taking the business of homesteading seriously, but there were times when it was plain that he was taking something very seriously. He had a straight and level eye, an easy way of meeting people and the reserve that comes of good breeding. Mary made tea and thin buttered toast and brought out her lace cloth

and silver tea-pot. When he was leaving, he said, with the sincerity that had made him one with the people of this new country, "This has been like an afternoon at home."

Then the whole neighbourhood surprised them one night with a "shower." The roads were bad for a night journey, but everyone who could get a waggon over the water-holes came. They brought food for the supper they would have before the evening was over, and gifts for the new family. Mrs. Joliette had made a quilt filled with wool from their own sheep; there was nothing "so light and warm, so good as wool for this Nort' country," she said. Some of the women had jars of pickles and "preserves"—a bride from the city had no way of stocking her cellar with such things. Mrs. Olsen brought a hen and a brood of little chickens. She explained, that knowing about when this shower would be coming, she had wanted to have the chickens old enough to be moved but still young enough to be nice, and what tricks she had had to use to get a hen to sit so early! A lively discussion started from this. Every woman seemed to know of a way with a sitting hen that none of the others had ever heard of. Tony Marotta, an Italian contributed a huge and heavy-looking rolling-pin.

"I see da missus embroider da towell'," he told the party, "an' I t'inka dat girl mebbby she needa some odder t'ing roun' da house. I t'inka now Shoedecker, he Dotch; mebbby Dotchman he wan'

too moch hees own way. So I mak' Mis' Shoedecker da rolling-pin."

There was great hilarity over Tony's joke. One of the Joliette boys suggested shyly that perhaps Pete could borrow the rolling-pin to make a neck-yoke.

Jim Irwin gave Mary a pair of old silver candlesticks. He had brought them from the Old Country, expecting to make much of candlelight in his log house in the woods, but he had found that candlelight could be very jolly when one had company, but a disturbing sort of light when one was alone.

They had a good time. The little house was very crowded and sometimes the party was noisy, with a dozen people trying to talk at once, but there was no "rough housing." And missing nothing, liking these people who were being so kind to her, Mary noticed how much of their fun was due to "the foreigners": Tony, the Italian,—the one regret of the party seemed to be that he had not brought his accordion; the Joliettes, though of course they were more truly Canadian than any of the others—their ancestors had been among the first settlers of Quebec; the young Eraschucks and some Ukrainian cousins who put on a dance that moved like a whirlwind through the kitchen. Oh there was colour enough here for anyone who had eyes to see it!

A few week later, when the roads were better, and Peter, with Hans Olsen to help him had brought Mary's piano out from town, the Shoedeckers had

a housewarming. Settlers always came from far and near to a housewarming, and the house would never have held them all, but Peter had some lumber fresh from the mill, and he built a platform in the yard so that they could dance out of doors. There were guests at this gathering that even Peter had never seen before—young men from the sawmills and homesteads farther back in the bush; they had heard, in the ways such news travels, that there was to be a dance at Shoedeckers' and they knew they would be welcome.

The moon was full and the night was cool. The men brought the piano from the house to the dance platform, three fiddles appeared from somewhere—it was never necessary to arrange for music beforehand; fiddlers took their turns, someone was always ready to "chord" on the piano, and someone could always be counted on to "call off."

A lumberman who happened to be in the neighbourhood with his portable saw-mill opened the dance. With some prodding from eager young men, he mounted a chair beside the piano and called, "Partners for Circassian Circle," and two by two the dancers took their places. There was the usual tuning of strings, then the fiddles screeched into "The Girl I Left Behind Me". The piano chorded in, not always in harmony, but very definitely marking the rhythm, and they were off.

A lantern or two had been hung against the side of the house for light, but they were soon taken

away, for the moon was clear and who wouldn't dance in the moonlight when there was moonlight to dance in? Later in the evening the cold of the Northern night settled in, a light frost whitened the grass, but the dancers were glowing. They were young and tireless, strong from their work in the fields and woods. Some of them were beautifully shy and all were decorously well-behaved. It was not always so at the dances in this new country, but as one young millhand observed to another, "You wouldn't try anything else at Pete Shoe-decker's."

Around midnight they came into the house in relays for coffee and sandwiches and cake. It was three o'clock in the morning before the last waggon drove away.

Peter and Mary stood at the little gate watching them go. She had come out of the house in her light dress and he took off his coat and put it on her.

"You'd have thought he'd hate to do that before everyone," Jack Ritchie remarked to Andre Joliette as they took a short cut home through the woods, the Joliette waggon being more than full without Andre.

"Why?" asked the French boy. He saw nothing strange about it. "She'd be cold in that white dress." Then he laughed, a laugh of keen amusement that rang fresh and young through the woods; he seemed to have just discovered something.

"You try it when you have a girl out some chilly night," he advised. "It goes over big."

Jack had never taken a girl out, but what with parties like this, and a man like Pete Shoedecker acting as he did, he was beginning to give the matter some thought.

## CHAPTER VI

THE days were very full, on the new homestead. Mary could not understand how anyone could work the hours Peter did and come back each day as fresh as the day before. He seemed to begin with daybreak and continue until dark. Sometimes she wakened in the grey dawn to hear his axe in the woods where the next clearing would be. During the winter he had cut trees, hauled them to the mill and brought back the lumber, and all through spring, before the ground was ready for breaking, he was busy building.

There was so much to be done all at once when a man undertook to hew a farm out of solid bush. This spring a loft must be added to the barn, and sundry stock pens built, and a granary. Neighbours came to help when there were timbers to raise or other work that a man could not do alone. Sometimes someone who could spare a half day would come and work with him at hewing logs, or shingling a roof, or putting down a floor. Mary was hanging out her washing one morning when Tony Marotta came swinging in at the gate, tossing up his hammer and catching it and whistling. The Marottas always seemed to manage to mix some sort of play with their work, just as they planted poppies among their

potatoes. It looked strange at first to see a sprinkling of red poppies blowing above the potato tops, but the potatoes were always free of weeds and the earliest in the settlement.

"The wife say she hear building over here; I best take my hammer an' go over," Tony explained.

That was it. The sound of a new settler's hammer was enough to bring his neighbours to help him.

Mary never knew in the morning, whether she would have one man or half a dozen to feed at noon. If there was to be a crowd, Peter would come to the house in the forenoon to tell her. Looking a bit apologetic, but with most of his mind on the building in progress he would ask, "Can you manage?" And always she said she could; but no bride ever worried more over her first formal entertaining than Mary did over these dinners for the men who were her neighbours. She had the same fear that she might not do the right thing.

Mrs. Olsen was a great help. She had taught her to make bread, and while Peter praised her bread and Mary was rather proud of it herself, it was still a matter of anxiety and labour.

The first day the men came to help with the barn she had just one loaf left. She could "stretch it out" with biscuits or potato cakes, but that would not be the same as having bread. "Can you get along?" Peter had asked and she had said she could—he had enough to worry about without the housekeeping; there was nothing he could do about

it anyway. But she wondered how she would live down the disgrace of having men for dinner and no bread for them.

And then Mrs. Olsen drove into the yard, tugged a basket from the back of the buggy and came to the house.

"Hans was telling me las' night the men come here to-day," she explained. "I says to myself, 'Mis' Shoedecker may be out off breat. She don't know yet how men come like an army by surprise.' I had some off Pete's flour left, so I yump in an' set a baking. I yust got it out off the oven one hour ago."

"That means you got up in the middle of the night to mix it?"

"Ya. I set the alarm for two an' mixed it down first time t'en. I didn't had to get up again till morning. It was not'ing."

. . . . .

It was good to see the buildings going up, the walls of peeled logs dazzling white in the sunshine. Anywhere else such buildings might seem squatty and primitive, but against their background of poplar woods they were both practical and fitting. There were the barn and the granary and the sheep pen, all set close together and well away from the house. There was the beginning of an implement shed, but that would have to be finished later. Soon they would have quite a farmstead. Back of

the barn the lambs frisked about in the sun and the cattle rested in the straw in the corral for a while before starting off to pasture in the woods. The straw stack was almost gone now, but this year, if the weather was fair so they could get the crops in early, and if the frost did not come too soon in the fall, they would have both grain and straw in abundance for their animals, for they had rented fifty acres of cleared land from a man who had left his claim and gone to town. Peter had been rushing the building so that as soon as the land was ready to work, he could get at the sowing.

This was his next campaign. The rented land was three miles away, so he took his dinner with him and was away from home all day and every day for two weeks. The weather kept dry and sunny. "Just what we need," he explained to Mary. "If this bush clay is turned open to the sun while it's wet, it ~~hardens~~ hardens like slabs of cement."

He finished sowing on Saturday night. All day Sunday it rained, and he rested with a deep content. It still rained on Monday but he put on long boots and went to the clearing to cut brush. At noon Mary talked to him about a flower bed. They had been over the ground together several times that spring, deciding just where they would plant perennials next year, when Peter had had time to cut the young brush and plough the whole plot and seed a lawn space and build a fence close enough to keep the chickens out. But of course they wanted

some flowers this year, Mary said. Of course they did, Peter agreed.

"I have the seeds all ready," she told him one day as if that were already a good beginning.

"I'll clear a place for you just as soon as I can," he promised. "The ground's too wet to dig yet anyway."

Two days later he came in from work at the clearing in the middle of the forenoon.

"I went over to look at the potato ground on the breaking and it's dry enough to work," he announced with satisfaction. "I brought up some special Dooleys for seed and the sooner I get them in, the better chance there is of beating the frost in the fall. I wouldn't lose them for a lot. If we get a good crop it means the best seed potatoes in the West for the whole settlement next spring and some to sell to the farmers around Elkton. They're certified seed and—what's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Mary and tried to laugh. She hadn't known she was showing her disappointment so childishly.

"But there *is* something," he persisted, troubled. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking about the ground for flowers."

"Oh!" he said, obviously relieved. "I suppose that would be dry enough to work, too. That's too bad. Just have patience for a day or two. I'll do it as soon as I can."

The potato planting took more than a day or two,

for the ground must be harrowed and re-harrowed and the seed treated and the ground worked over again after the planting was done. Mary showed a definitely failing interest in the reports of progress that Peter brought home each noon and night. She was thinking of the spot that was to be her flower-bed, still overgrown with briars and young poplars.

The potato planting was finished early one afternoon. Mary knew, because Peter came from the field with the harrows and plough on the waggon, and another queer-looking plough that she was sure she had never seen before. Evidently it took a lot of machinery to plant a patch of certified potatoes. Anyway the job was done. Now they could get at the flower garden.

But when Peter came in he seemed to have something difficult to say.

"I met Pierre Joliette on the road," he began. "He was taking his breaking-plough home from Andre's quarter, and he said he could let me have it to break the new clearing if I could take it right now. It saves me a half day's trip to Andre's place for it. I could finish cutting the brush on the new clearing before dark to-night, and get the breaking and all done by the end of the week. . . . I was going to get at your flower garden to-night. . . ."

"Don't worry about the flower garden," she said so quickly that he wondered; but when she turned from the stove to put the supper on the table she

seemed quite herself, except that two red spots burned on her cheeks.

"But it is a shame. I've been putting you off so long about it."

"Has each of the Joliette boys a homestead?" she enquired irrelevantly.

"I guess Andre's the only one old enough."

"They'll have a little colony of their own if they all settle around here," she went on, talking very fast and not looking at him—talking of things that did not matter at all, that they never wasted words over,—there was always so much else that they wanted to say to each other.

This aloofness in her was something entirely new to Peter, and puzzling. And she wasn't eating, and her eyes were very bright.

He finished his supper, came around to her end of the table and put his big hand on her shoulder.

"I don't wonder you're mad about this," he said. "You've set your heart on the flowers so, and you have little enough of that sort of thing up here. Just as soon as I've finished the breaking I promise I'll do it before I start another thing." If he had only stopped there, but he went on to add a little joke as he might to a sulky child—"That's if it doesn't rain, or something else happen."

She had always been ready to listen to him before, and there was something in his hard, gentle hands more eloquent to her than anything he would ever be able to say; but now she looked at the hand on

her shoulder in wide surprise and pushed back her chair.

"I suppose I'd better lose no time if I'm going to get the brush out," he finished lamely.

"I'll be busy, too," she said.

She washed the dishes and went out to the garden. The sun was still high. She would have almost three good hours of daylight left for her work and she went at it in earnest. If Peter couldn't find time to clear the ground for her garden, she would do it herself. She surveyed the spot as she had done scores of times before. The first thing to do would be to cut down the poplars, then dig the ground.

She went to the granary where Peter kept the hoes and such tools, and found the spade; at the woodpile she picked up the axe; and she set to work. She had never used an axe before and the poplars were tough, but the blade was sharp, and while it never fell twice in just the same place, by hacking persistently this way and that, she was able to at least mutilate a considerable number of trees.

It was almost dark when Peter came in and she was still working. She heard him putting his horses in the barn, saw him come out carrying a piece of harness—they had broken something that he would have to mend to-night. She heard him opening the little gate and coming across the yard to her, but she did not speak and neither did he. He simply took the axe from her and he was very business-like about it.

"Haven't I told you never to touch the axe?" he scolded. "It's sharp as a razor. One false move with it and you could take a foot off."

Unconsciously, as a man does who is careful of his tools, he was examining the nicked and battered edge of the blade. It was an unfortunate move.

"I'm awfully sorry if I've spoiled it," she apologized in the cool, acid way that was so new and surprising, "but if we were to have a garden at all, I didn't see any use of waiting longer. If we are just going to live like peasants, and think of nothing but the land all the time, then I suppose we might as well stop trying for anything better."

"I'm afraid we'll have to think of the land a good deal of the time if we're to make a living from it," he told her, "and one of the hardest things you'll have to learn is that we can't get everything done at once. As soon as I can, I'll dig this for you."

"I have no doubt other farm women make their gardens. I guess I can manage by myself."

He saw the spade then.

"If you're thinking of attempting to use that," he said, "don't. No woman could dig this ground with the roots matted in it as they are. And you'd do yourself more harm trying, than you'd get over in a long time." His eyes were very level and his voice was low as he added, "Remember, Mary, don't do it."

He was telling her what she was not to do! She looked him up and down in cool surprise, which he

pretended not to notice. He took the axe, walked to the woodpile and with one stroke drove it half way into a block.

"That's the only way to keep children or other irresponsible people safe from an axe," he remarked good-humouredly, "drive it so far into a block they can't get it out."

But Mary was already half way to the house. He picked up the broken harness and followed her. At the door she passed him and without looking in his direction said,

"I'm going to bed."

"I should think you'd be ready for it," he replied, and got out his kit to mend the harness.

. . . . .

Some time in the night Mary half awakened. A cold wind was blowing in at the window, and a hand was drawing up a blanket and tucking it around her. . . . Something was wrong—oh, yes—she had quarrelled with Peter. And the flower bed—she wouldn't get started at it for a while yet, not until Peter finished the breaking. The hand tucking in the blanket came closer and, still half asleep, she found it and hugged it to her. All that trouble had been yesterday. What did a trivial thing like a flower bed matter anyway?

The next morning Mary made griddle-cakes for breakfast. Peter liked them and they hadn't had any for some time.

At noon when Peter came in from work, he brought his water pail full of marsh-marigolds from the swamp. He set the flowers on the door-step as he passed the house with the team, and Mary came and took them in.

And when he had finished the breaking—not that day nor the next—he cleared and dug a plot for a flower bed and they planted the seeds together.

. . . . .

Warm weather came with a rush to the North that year. All through seeding the sun had been warm at noontime, but the mornings and evenings were crisp and frosty, and the winds were high and cold. Then without warning the change came, and with it, that pest of the bush country—the mosquitoes.

Peter noticed them first when he went into the woods to cut trees for a new clearing. That night they were in the house—not many yet, but enough to be troublesome and a sinister warning of the hordes that would follow. Peter lighted a smudge outside the door and they brought out their chairs and sat beside it for a little while, but the smoke burned their eyes and altogether it did not help much.

“I should have got wire to make screens the last time I was in town,” Peter said. “I’ll go and get it to-morrow. We’ll be starting road work any day now and when that begins I’ll want to work every

day to make out the taxes." Paying his year's taxes in road work was a privilege that no homesteader wanted to miss.

It took a Poplar Hill settler a full day to go to town and do all the errands that he had to do for himself and his neighbours, so it was almost dark when Peter got home.

"Lucky I made the trip to-day," he told Mary. "I met Hans Olsen coming to tell me the road work begins to-morrow."

And when the chores were done, he set to work to make a screen for the bedroom window. It was almost midnight when he had it finished and, with Mary holding the lantern, had it nailed into place. They got rid of the mosquitoes that were already in the room and shut the door on any newcomers.

"Heavenly," said Mary, as the breeze blew in at the window and no threatening hum disturbed the quiet. "To-night we can sleep."

Peter left home early in the morning. He expected to be away all day—at least the work at the far end of the township would take until well on in the afternoon, so he took his dinner with him.

"Then I'll use the day to wash blankets," Mary decided. "It's going to be sunny with a nice little wind to dry them."

It remained sunny, but early in the forenoon the wind fell. With the ambition of the new housewife she decided, when she had the day to herself, to wash not only blankets but bedspreads and braided

rugs and a dozen other odds and ends that must go through the ceremony of spring cleaning. The fire in the little kitchen was hot. The steam from the boiler rose in clouds to the ceiling and fell again in a close, damp fog. The day grew warmer and mosquitoes came into the house in swarms, stinging her face and arms as she worked, flying close to her eyes, tangling themselves in her hair; and the whole room seemed filled with the noise they made. She brushed at them with impatience, then with a sort of terror. It was foolish, she knew—the attack of a mosquito had always been something to laugh about—but not in places like this, where they came in thousands like a plague.

She worked hard and fast, wringing blankets that were too heavy for her as if they were dish cloths. Noon came, but she worked on; she had not intended undertaking so much work in one day, but that did not matter. If she could just keep busy perhaps she could keep from thinking of the days and days ahead with the kitchen too hot, and mosquitoes. . . . Peter had said the hardest thing was to learn to wait. . . . It wasn't Peter's fault. He was working against bigger things, acres and acres of bush to be cleared and made into land. Of course the land had to come first, but what would the years do to you—years of working and waiting for the things that meant living?

When the washing was finished the lines were full. She swept and tidied the kitchen, still working

with a swiftness she could not understand. As the fire died out, the mosquitoes became a little quieter, and when everything was done she went into the bedroom where she could shut them out, threw herself on the bed and cried; and however hard she tried, she could not stop.

A waggon creaked into the yard. She heard Peter speak to the horses and knew he was coming in. She was not crying now—he would find her looking as she was and what could she tell him?

He called her and she managed to answer. Then she was meeting him at the bedroom door. She was quiet enough now—all the strength had gone out of her—but her face was blotched and swollen and disfigured.

“Why what is the matter?” he cried, startled and frightened. “What is it?”

“Nothing at all,” she said. “I *am* ashamed about it.”

“But what?” His hands on her shoulders were demanding; his face under its tan was gray.

“Really nothing, I think, but the mosquitoes,” she answered, and managed a twisted smile.

He didn’t think it was funny. He gave a long breath of relief and held her close for a minute, brushing back her hair with his great, roughened hands.

“Ask any woman who has pioneered in a bush country what she found hardest to put up with, and with most of them it won’t be the cold or the

hard work or the lonesomeness; it will be the mosquitoes," he told her soberly. "And I suppose you've been seeing swarms of mosquitoes ahead of you every summer for the rest of your life. They don't last after the swamps dry up in the summer, you know, and there are less and less of them as we cut the trees. There's a saying among bushmen that the only way to kill the mosquito is with the axe. In a few years, when we get more land cleared, they won't trouble us at all. But I don't expect you to wait for that. I'll get the rest of the house screened this afternoon."

"You didn't finish the road work?"

"We finished the far piece. We were just moving down to the end of the line and I called in to say hello to you."

"But just because I get the jitters over things like mosquitoes, you don't have to stop your work to put on screens. I know we can't get everything done at once." She stopped and reddened furiously; that was exactly what he had said when they quarrelled over the flower bed.

He cocked an eyebrow and looked across at her until she reddened more.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said that," he grinned. "I expect it will return to haunt me. Anyway, this is different."

He unhitched his team and made a smudge for them in the corral, and he finished screening the house. Then he set up his little rancher's stove

in "the shack," moved his tools and work bench to one side and cleared out the rest for Mary to use for a wash-house in hot weather. It was the best he could do.

"If you can only stick it for a while, we'll have a real place here some day," he promised her.

## CHAPTER VII

“YOU haven’t been off the place for a whole day since you came here,” Peter reminded Mary one morning. “I have to go to town some day this week anyway. Let’s go to-day and I’ll drop you off at Jane Meadows’ for a visit.”

So they made a holiday of it, though they must travel in a waggon with a few bags of oats piled in the back. Peter had taken the oats from a farmer in exchange for a horse, and he would barter them in town for plough-shares and groceries. “My father used to say that a fore-handed farmer always has something to sell,” he remarked. “Up here he has something to trade.”

They left home in the middle of the morning, took their lunch with them, and at noon found a grassy spot by the side of the road and spread a picnic meal while the horses fed. It had something of the thrill of playing truant, running off from the farm on a work day and loitering along the road like this. Peter, stretched full length on the grass, shaded his eyes and looked at the sky.

“We’ve got to do more getting away like this,” he said. “A bush farm could eat you up if you’d let it. Of course I like it, but when I’m there I’m always wondering how much I can get done to-day

and to-morrow and by the end of the week. I could keep fifteen men busy all the time, to do what I want to get done this year. And I think about it and talk about it so much that I know I'm not much company a lot of the time."

"Sounds almost like mental cruelty," she drawled contentedly, half asleep, lying on a blanket, face down like a little girl. The sun was warm and a cool little breeze stirred the grass and ruffled her hair. "I think I'd like to go gipsying with you sometime, Peter. Could we?"

"Sure we could. Some day when we have a hundred acres of wheat on our own land—imagine wheat growing where I'm pulling out trees now—we'll have a car and go off for a holiday as long as you like."

"How long will it take to get a hundred acres of land ready to grow wheat?"

"Sometimes I wonder"—then, quickly, "not so long. The farms around Elkton haven't been settled so very many years. I think the Meadows' were about the first to move in."

The lowing of cattle, heard faintly for some time, was coming nearer. They looked and over the rise of the hill a covered waggon appeared—more settlers coming into the homesteading country. They waited until the caravan came up and stopped beside them.

The horses were thin and tired. The man driving looked tired, and the woman with the baby, on the seat beside him seemed utterly weary. A little

girl sat between them and two older boys on horse-back were coming behind, driving the cattle.

"Coming to neighbour with us?" Peter asked them.

"Going on to the next township," the man replied.

"Had a long trip?"

"Three hundred miles. We were just north of the border."

"It's still dry, then?"

"Drier than a chip out of hell. No pasture and no water. Even on the move, the cattle have picked up, the last fifty miles. You been here long?"

"Not quite a year. Our place is about ten miles back, a mile south of the highway. My wife and I are on our way to town, but if you'd like to pull in there for a day or two, there's lots of pasture in the bush for the cattle."

"It would be a rest for you and the children," Mary urged the woman.

But they thought they had better "push on." Another day would see them at their journey's end.

"I feel more rested since we've come where there's grass and water," the woman smiled. "Sometimes I was afraid the drought would drive me crazy."

"You'll like it here," said Peter, and added in a fatherly way for his thirty-odd years, "if you just take it a little easy for a while."

As they talked he stroked the neck of the horse near him and his practised eyes went over the outfit, missing nothing. With his hands on the bridles, he stepped the team back in the traces, lifted the collars forward and found the burns that he had known were there.

"I think I have an old sack in the waggon that would ease this a little," he said casually. He brought it, and proceeded to make a pad for each collar. Then he went to his waggon again, took out a sack of oats and swung it into the back of the cariole.

"That will help a little for the rest of the trip," he said. "You may have a hard pull on the back township roads."

The cariole moved on. Another family, driven North by the drought, were finding a home in the bush.

. . . . .

Jane Meadows gave Mary a warm welcome. "Seems I've been waiting for this for a long time," she scolded Peter. "All spring I've been looking for you to come. And now you can't stay, yourself? But you'll be back for supper."

Her brown eyes glowed in her weathered face. Her hair was snow white and she wore a brown print dress and a white apron so crisp that Mary guessed she had put it on when she saw them drive in.

Jane's house was like herself—old and sturdy and fresh and at once restful and interesting. It had no architectural style or balance. It rambled as houses

do that have been built in stages, as the family finances allowed or the family life required an extra room or two; and its furnishings had been acquired slowly with forethought for years of service and comfort.

The farm, like the house, was well kept. Jane and her husband had claimed it from solid bush thirty years ago, when the railroad stopped forty miles south of Elkton. They had come in, in a covered waggon, bringing their little girl, the only child they ever had; and with stout hearts and keen minds and willing hands they had set to work to make a home. They had had good years and years when the frost took their wheat, or the price of cattle made their work a total loss so far as money was concerned, but they had prospered in a modest way. When her husband died, Jane hired help and continued to farm. They had worked and planned so closely together that she knew just what he would do at every turn of the season, in any emergency of market or weather. She could always get neighbour boys to work for her and she managed well.

And of course she had Jean. In spite of her loss—and when Tom Meadows died Jane knew that part of herself had gone with him—her life was still full. Jean was eighteen then, going to college in Winnipeg, winning all sorts of honours and coming home, every vacation, eager as a bird to its nest. Two years later when the 'flu came again, Jean was taken, too. Jane still farmed, still lived on in the same

place and seldom mentioned her loss. When she spoke of Tom or Jean, it was of the good times they had had together. If she had one passion left, it was that other people might make the most of their happiness while it was within reach.

Some of this she told Mary and found her an eager listener.

"It's a comfort to talk of these things to someone like yourself, who can get the picture," she said, "first a country all bush, then acre by acre the land cleared and better homes built; a few years more and a stretch of farms almost as nice as you'd find in an old settlement back East. It's hard to realize it's all been done in thirty years, but it has. We were the first to take land in this township and that was thirty years ago. It won't take that long to open up the land around Poplar Hill, with settlers pouring in as fast as they're coming now—and good settlers, too—not the prospecting kind that keep moving on, but farmers who know the land and want to make homes for their families.

"But that isn't all a new country needs, and it's a blessing for it to have young women like yourself coming—women who sort of 'gentle' a wild country, as the cowboys say about their horses—girls like you and young men like Peter. He tells me he never got past the third book at school, that his father and mother both died about that time, and he came West when he was eighteen and worked on farms till he got a place of his own; but I never

knew an educated man with a keener mind, nor a travelled one with broader ideas."

"I know," said Mary softly.

Someone passed the window. At least, a flash of rusty red brushed past the lilac bushes and a second later a woman appeared in the doorway. It was Nettie Culliver. Dave Culliver was homesteading on a quarter back from the highway, and Nettie was his wife. He had met and married her after a brief acquaintance at the close of the war, while his company waited in the city for demobilization. They had lived in town for a while, Dave taking whatever work he could find that a boy from the farm could do. Finally even this failed. It was only the threat of starvation that had induced Nettie to come to a homestead in the bush, and the longer she stayed the less she liked it.

She was slim and dark; pretty, too, until one began to be bothered by her discontented mouth and restless eyes. She wore a rusty knitted suit with a soft little hat of the same colour crushed down on her hair. If the suit had been bought through a mail order catalogue, it had been carefully chosen to make the most of her gipsy attractiveness. One knew that however lean the farm returns might be, or however other homesteaders' wives might stretch their wardrobes from one year to another, this woman would somehow, always find a way to get clothes.

"Dave met Peter on the road and he said you were

here," she explained to Mary, "so I just decided I'd come over for tea. It's so long since I've seen another woman I was just ready to fly, to-day. And," she added when Jane was in the kitchen out of hearing, "to see someone who hasn't been buried in these woods for years! Jane's a dear—there's no one else around here in her class at all—but, well, she's been here thirty years. And the way she gives advice to everyone! Isn't it awful! Don't you love it? Has she started on you yet?"

She laughed a laugh that was low and stagey and forced. She was trying to be friendly—a sort of we-two-against-this-whole-stupid-settlement attitude and Mary was positively afraid of her. She knew that to-morrow Nettie would be dissecting Peter Shoedecker's wife to someone else, as she was trying to ridicule the rest of the community now.

Jane made tea early. She knew that Dave Culliver would be coming home to supper at six o'clock and going back to the clearing to work until dark, and she intended to have her hired boy take Nettie home in time to cook her husband's supper. She spread a cloth of fine, white linen on a little table beside the sitting-room window, and brought out her best china and home-made bread and cake and strawberry jam.

"Did you know we could grow strawberries up here?" she asked Mary. "These are from my own patch. I could give you some plants to set out this fall if you'd like them; you, too, Nettie. I see a lot

of the women around here still going out picking the wild fruit when a few tame plants in their own gardens would save all that tramping through the woods, and they'd be sure of them."

Mary was eager to start a berry patch; Peter had often spoken of it, she said—Jane noticed with approval that she had not outgrown the bride's habit of quoting Peter on even the most trivial matters—Peter's folks had considered their gardens almost as important as their crops.

"The Dutch brought that idea with them from Holland," Jane remarked. "You've read of the gardens in Holland. Wherever you find the Dutch, they're great people to make homes and get things around them."

Nettie did not think she would be wanting any plants.

"I can't think we'll be here very long," she said. "It seemed sort of a lark at first, like camping out. It still seems like camping. I simply can't put any roots down here, and Dave seems determined to stay. Of course I can understand you liking it, Mrs. Meadows, with a place like this, but for younger people, and back in the bush like we are——"

Jane smiled. It was still as vivid in her memory as if it had happened yesterday, the day she and Tom Meadows came to the spot where her house stood now, at the end of a half broken trail, and in the very heart of the woods. Standing on their

own land, they had said a little prayer of thankfulness. She was years younger then than Nettie Culliver was now, and just as eager for life, but to her, coming to make a home in the woods had been no lark; it was a great adventure. And they had not only made a home for themselves, she and Tom; they had had a part in founding a community. Jane was modestly proud of their own home and brazenly proud of the community. She always told newcomers that they wouldn't find more honourable people, nor kinder, nor better neighbours, if they searched the world over. And she was annoyed now, coming back from her reverie, to find that Nettie was talking about Dora Whitton. She listened for a few seconds, then——

"I couldn't believe that," she said flatly. "When Dora worked for me——" and the rest of their talk was something of a eulogy.

Jane was getting old; a woman like Nettie Culliver worried her, but to have normal young people like the Shoedeckers around was balm to her soul. She sent Nettie home early, then she set to work at a job she liked—getting a company supper on the table.

She spread a shining damask cloth, then she pretty well covered it with crochet "table mats." She filled a green glass vase with a bunch of garden flowers and put that in the centre. She brought a sealer of canned chicken from the cellar, carefully arranged it on a platter, with sprigs of parsley at

regular intervals all around the edge. That went to the head of the table with the silver cold meat fork. At the other end, two tall old glass preserve dishes, each standing on a foot, like an urn, were filled with a red preserve and a yellow preserve—you could have your choice. She made a salad of lettuce and tender green onions and a sour cream dressing—there was a special blue glass bowl for this. What space was left was filled with pickles and jelly and cake—a spicy, fruity cake which she kept moist in a stone crock, against the emergency of unexpected guests. She had it all ready when Peter drove in.

She asked him about his crops and stock and was flatteringly astonished that he had accomplished so much in the few months he had been on the place.

“Just don’t overdo it,” she warned him. “Of course pioneers have to work hard if they are to get ahead at all, but looking back now, I’m glad we learned early to live as we went along. Every day needs—but I do get so preachy as I get older. . . . There’s a book on the shelf that Tom brought me once when he went to Winnipeg with a carload of hogs—his own and the neighbours’. He was good at marketing and the farmers around sometimes got him to see to selling their stock along with his own. This book is *What Men Live By* and it gives just four things: work, play, love and worship. It’s a good book. I’ll lend it to you; you might like to read it together.

"We didn't have so many books so we read this one till we knew it almost by heart. It was easy to agree that the four things necessary 'to live by' were 'work, play, love and worship,' but how to manage them? Most of us run to one or another of them and forget about the rest. I've decided it's like balancing meals for children; the trick is to get some of everything into each day. It isn't so hard—some work, some play and so on. . . . Oh, about the worship; there's a new missionary in Elkton; just come from the Junction. I think he could go out to the Hill sometimes if you wanted him. In fact I took it on myself to ask him, and he said he has three other settlements on his circuit but he could go out to you maybe once a month—if the folks want him."

They were sure they would want him; they understood that a travelling evangelist of one sect or another had occasionally held a meeting in the school, but there had been no religious service of any kind in the settlement since Peter came. They would see the neighbours about it.

The stars were out as they drove home through the woods; they had never known there could be so many of them. The trail from the highway to their own place was rough, but a lot better than when they first drove over it together in the spring—and they had not minded it then. Their own little clearing looked small against the picture of the sleek, broad farms nearer town, but what a promise

it held for them! And the log house seemed quite complete. Jane's first house had been small too, but how her eyes shone when she spoke of it!

"Five acres cleared already and five more by fall," mused Peter, surveying his holdings, "but I must stop counting acres. What was it the book said we need—work . . . play . . . love and worship? Hmm. . . . I guess that's about right, too."

## CHAPTER VIII

**F**OR a while after this, it seemed that the work of the farm did not press with such a fever of urgency, but this was partly because the sowing was done and the earth was taking her turn in bringing the crops to fruition. Peter did not work less steadily, but the job now was clearing land and breaking it, and of that a man could do only what he could each day, or each year, and there would still be more of it waiting for him.

He was making a clearing some distance from the house now, along the new roadway, and because the days were long and the horses would have a rest spell occasionally while he had to dig around a troublesome root to make it ready for pulling, he told Mary that he would like to stay on until sundown.

"The horses will rest, but you'll be working all the time," she reminded him. But he only laughed. He had never known a day's work too hard or too long for him.

At four o'clock, Mary made a pot of tea and some corn cakes, and took them out to him. As she came through the woods she could hear him talking to the horses. The animals were uneasy at this new work. Until they came here they had worked only

in the smooth soil of the prairie; they fretted at the continuous starting and stopping, the hard, straining pull and the sudden release when a root gave way; and it took all the quieting power of the man's voice, his steady hands on the reins and the plough, to control their nervous plunges. A hot sun poured down and little breeze came through the walls of bush, but under the trees it was cool, and Peter tied the horses in the shade, took off his hat and wiped his dripping face, then picked up his grubbing hoe and was attacking another root when he saw Mary.

"Hello! Anything wrong?" he called, but her basket explained her errand.

"Just a surprise party," she told him.

He found a grassy place in the shade and sat down with her to rest.

"This is great," he glowed as he had his cup refilled and took another hot cake, his eyes resting with satisfaction on the opening he had made in the woods.

"But it's terrible work, Peter."

"Why?"

"It's so unreasonable—a man and horses against a solid mass of timber like that! Is there no easier way, with machines or something?"

"There are machines for brushing, and of course in some places they use tractors with breaking-ploughs. After a year or two, when we get ahead a little, I'll try to hire someone with an engine to

do the rest of the breaking; might even get an engine of my own, but not for a while yet. I've been thinking, though, if I could get work after harvest with one of the threshing outfits around Elkton, I might sort of trade work with them—get them to bring a tractor next spring and plough what I clear this winter.”

“If you could get work with a thresher this fall, couldn't he come with his engine now and finish this?”

“That would be going into debt. I wouldn't feel right about it. Anyway, a pioneer generally makes his first land by hand.”

But he seemed in no hurry to be at it so long as she was there. A little breeze fluttered the leaves of the poplars; the birds, never molested by man and busy with affairs of their own, seemed to consider the newcomers just two more creatures of the woods, and flew low over their heads; and a squirrel darted past almost over their feet, and scuttled into his hole with a whistle of fright or defiance. Mary leaned her head against the tree at her back, while Peter, stretched on the grass beside her, explained the individual sounds that made up the hum of the woods' orchestra.

When she said she must go, he rose to his feet, reached to help her up, and chuckled like a school-boy when she found herself tied to the tree by her apron strings. He had to undo them then and tie them properly where they belonged.

"I'll take the cows home with me if I can find them," she said, as she was leaving. "I'm going to learn to milk, Peter. I can save you that much when you're so busy."

"No," he said shortly, "not that. The Shoedeckers never let their women do men's work—not even in my grandfather's time, when all the other women around worked in the fields, the Shoedeckers never did. You're not going to start milking cows."

"But if you go threshing in the fall, you won't be here to do the milking."

"If I go threshing it will be in the bargain that I borrow the thresher's car to come home nights."

"But it's so ridiculous for a woman to live on a farm and not know how to do things like that. Suppose you were to be sick?"

He laughed right out at that; so far as he knew, he had never been sick in his life.

"Of course," he said, "if you want to know how to milk, I don't mind you learning, but not now. Wait till fall when it isn't so hot, and the cows aren't giving so much, and there aren't any flies to bother, and we have fresh straw in the corral."

"And until I have a nice, pink, painted milking-stool, and a little tin pail all my own," she mocked him.

"Here's your basket. You'd better be on your way. And don't be sticking out your tongue at me."

But he did not give her her basket right away. The birds and the squirrels and all the other creatures of the wild had time to play in the sun. The woods were full of it. Right over their heads a brown wren, scarcely off the nest after hatching her first brood of the season, flirted shamelessly with her mate. The clearing could wait for an hour. There would still be trees to cut when they were old, but youth was a sweet, wild, precious time and soon over.

. . . . .

Later in the summer there was hay to cut on the marshes. If a settler had no natural meadow on his land, where a lake or pond had dried, leaving the native grass as a sort of permanent pasture, he could, for a few dollars a year, rent from the Land Office the right to cut hay on land not yet homesteaded. Peter had to go four miles for his hay. He left early in the morning, took his lunch with him and returned each night with a load of hay. The bulk of the crop, he stacked where it was, built a fence of poles around it as a protection from wandering cattle, and left it to be hauled home in the winter as it was needed.

After a day at haying, he usually took the hoe and went to work in the potato field until dark. The certified Dooleys were growing as he had never known potatoes to grow anywhere else. Barring early frosts or other accidents, he would have a crop better than anything he had hoped for.

Mary worked with the hoe, too, but not in the potato field. In addition to her flower border she had a vegetable garden.

"I wish I had thought to plant some poppies among the cabbages, as Tony does with his potatoes," she often said to Peter during the summer. "There seems no good reason why a vegetable garden shouldn't be a bit decorative."

"Just wait till the sunflowers bloom and your purple cabbages turn really purple, and the cauliflower flowers come out," he encouraged her.

And sure enough, when the sunflower seeds began to ripen, canaries came to the garden in flocks, and from morning till night the air above the sunflower hedge was awhir with yellow wings. Later, when everything else had been harvested from the back of the house to the road, the black earth gave way to colour in rows of green cabbages, and purple cabbages, and the creamy heads of cauliflowers spreading apart their green leaves.

"That's exactly the right landscape gardening for the back yard of a homestead," Mary approved. She was a little proud of her work.

Harvest followed hard on the heels of haying. There were cold nights in August when Peter went to sleep fearing that his grain might be killed before morning, for the frost comes early in these new places where the plough has not yet changed the face of the countryside; but this year, except for whitening a few patches in the hollows, the frost

passed over. For the first time in years—years when he had sown every spring, and watched the sky all summer for rain that never came—Peter had grain of his own to thresh.

"If there's a cheerier sound than a threshing-machine humming on a fall morning, I've never heard it," he remarked to Mary when he came to the house for something on the morning of their own threshing day. His face wore the beautified expression of a music lover hearing his first concert in years. "Of course it's not quite the same when your crop comes from a rented place. When we start growing wheat on our land, we'll be the richest people in the West—in satisfaction anyway."

. . . . .

It was later in the fall, when the nights were beginning to close in early, that something happened which proved rather to the settlers' own pride in themselves, that Poplar Hill had a community spirit and initiative.

About nine o'clock one night when Peter and Mary were sitting by their kitchen fire, a horse galloped into the yard and Andre Joliette came to the door.

"The little home boy at Whittons' has run away and we're afraid he's lost in the bush," he said. And while Peter hurried into his mackinaw, and made sure that he had loads for his rifle, the frontiersman's means of signal, Andre explained that the

boy had not been coming to school for a few days, and the teacher, who boarded with the Joliettes, had been anxious about him—thought he might be sick or that the Whittons were keeping him at home to work, so she went around to inquire about him. Sam Whitton had told her he didn't want her interfering in his affairs, that he was feeding and clothing the boy and it was a queer thing if he couldn't have him at home to help once in a while, and he ordered her off the place.

"But that girl don't scare easy," Andre chuckled. "She said she wanted to see Billy; where was he? Sam said he'd sent him to hunt the cows. And he was so mad that he told her maybe more than he meant to. He said he'd told Billy not to come back till he found the cows, if he had to hunt all night. And oh, I guess the teacher sailed into him fine. She knows Billy's scared of the bush at night—he's only nine, and never saw a bush till he came here. Sam was driving her off, so she said she'd wait outside the gate till Billy came. And after dark a while, the cows came and he wasn't with them, so she ran home, all the way, and we're getting everyone out to hunt him."

In a few hours every man in the settlement was hunting the lost child. Some threshers were in the neighbourhood and they joined in the search. Sometime after midnight, Peter, doubling back on his trail, came out near the school. It occurred to him that if Billy was afraid to go back to Whittons',

he might come to the only other shelter he knew, the school. The door was not locked, so he opened it and called. There was no answer, but he thought he heard a stirring somewhere inside; so he struck a match and found the youngster crouching in a corner, frightened as an animal in a trap. He had been crying and now he became hysterical.

"I couldn't find the cows," he screamed. "I went all over and I couldn't find them."

"That's all right," the man reassured him. "The cows came home themselves. I guess you must have started them up without knowing it."

Peter had never seen a child in terror like this. He crowded closer to the wall and cried.

"I don't want to go back. Don't make me go back. He said he'd throw me in the lake."

"You don't have to go back," Peter promised him. He spoke quietly but it was well that the match went out then, or Billy might not have understood that the red fire in the man's eyes was all for Sam Whitton. "Do you know where the teacher keeps the lamp?" Peter went on casually. "We might as well have a light. Andre Joliette and some of the others will be coming along. You know Andre? I wouldn't be surprised if the teacher might come too."

There seemed to be some comfort in this possibility, but the boy's fears were not by any means ended.

"What are they coming for?"

"Well, the teacher went to Whittons' to see why you weren't at school to-day."

"I was digging potatoes."

"That's what she thought, and she wanted you to come back to school. So when you weren't at Whittons' she got us all to look for you. It's a kind of hide-and-seek and I seem to have got ahead of the rest."

Billy wasn't afraid now. He went straight through the dark to the lamp, while Peter, following, bumped against desks and chairs. When they had a light, Peter said:

"I guess we'd better go outside and shoot off the rifle to let the rest know where we are."

Billy was interested in this. He wasn't afraid when guns went off, he said. So Peter aimed at a star and fired. In a few seconds, guns answered from every direction. After a few minutes he fired again, and the answering shots sounded nearer.

"You said I don't have to go back to Whittons', didn't you?" Billy asked out of a silence.

"No. You don't have to go back."

"Not ever?"

"Not ever."

"Where will I go?"

"Would you like to come home with me for a while?"

"Yes. And after a while can I go back to my father?"

"Your father? Where is your father?"

"In the Soldiers' Hospital. They said if he'd go there they'd fix his leg. He had no work and the money was done. The Children's Aid man said they'd send me to the country while he was in the hospital, and Dad and I talked it over and I said I'd go. Mr. Whitton says soldiers never get out of the hospital but Dad said in his letter he would. He will, won't he?"

"If your father says he's getting better I should think he'd know a lot more about it than Mr. Whitton would." Peter could not say, "Of course your father will be out of the hospital soon." A man of Quaker tradition does not make a statement of which he is not sure, even to comfort a child, but he often finds a way of saying something that answers just as well.

The searchers came straggling along and Peter left Billy with Andre Joliette while he talked to the others. Finally they went into the school and someone nominated Pierre Joliette chairman. They were going to "hold a meeting."

"Have we quorum all right?" Pierre asked. "Sure, eight, ten, twelve. Mathieu's not twenty-one; his vote no good. Now then."

"I move," said Hans Olsen, speaking slowly and carefully—what he was going to say was important and must be expressed in a way befitting, "that ass we citizens of Poplar Hill have found Sam Witton iss not fit person for to ofer a child, we appoint Pete Shoedecker to be Willie Frank's

guardian, until such time as the Children's Aid can come out here an' look into t'ings."

"I second the motion," said Jim Irwin, and for some reason he seemed amused.

The motion was carried unanimously.

"Jim, mebbly you write de Chil'ren Aid an' say w'at for we do dees t'ing," the chairman directed, "an' say for dem to get busee 'bout it, an' not be so dam' careless w'ere dey sen' deir kids. Pete, you write de boy's fadder, eh?"

"Sure," said Peter.

"Sam Whitton's going to be good an' mad," Andre suggested gleefully.

"But I tank he not start anyt'ing wit' Pete," said Hans.

"Do you think you're within the law, doing this?" one of the threshers from Elkton began.

"Da law!" snorted Tony Marotta. "W'at law? Dat Shil'ren' Aid or w'at you call 'em in city, dey don' needa tinka dey come out here an' boss us."

The others agreed with Tony. Shut off from seats of government as they were, they felt quite equal to handling their own affairs. They might live in the backwoods but they weren't having children "treated rough" if they knew it.

They put out the light, closed the school and started off in their several directions towards home. It was four o'clock in the morning.

Billy did not waken until nearly noon. He was,

clearly, disappointed about missing the day at school; so Mary said they would have dinner early and he could go for the afternoon; the road would be new to him, so she would go part of the way with him. He thought he could find the way himself, but there was a place where the trail forked and Mary was taking no chance on having him find himself lost. Peter had told her about his "nerves" in the school the night before. At five o'clock he was home again, evidently contented enough and asking for chores to do.

"He seems all right now," Peter remarked, when he came in to supper. "I guess its just at night that he's afraid of the bush. I got to thinking, when I was working in the clearing, that he might be afraid, coming home through the swamp. I knew about when he'd be coming along, so I went where I could call to him if he seemed scared. I knew if he was frightened he'd be running—or I could tell anyhow. But he came dawdling along, throwing stones, so I knew he was all right."

"Did he see you?"

"No. It's better not to let him know that we ever think of anyone being afraid of the woods."

"Have you ever heard of child psychology, Peter?"

"Ever heard of what?"

"Child psychology."

"Oh, I dare say I've heard of it. I don't *know* anything about it."

In a few days an officer from the Children's Aid came to Poplar Hill, and Billy's father, released from the hospital for the trip, came with him. Only then did any of them know how bravely Billy had kept his homesickness to himself, how hard it had been for him, coming from street lights and solid rows of houses to get used to the loneliness of the woods and the darkness of country nights. They took him away with them, a transfigured Billy, radiant as a lost soul that has suddenly been reinstated in Paradise.

"I don't know how to thank you and the neighbours for what you did," the father said to Peter as they were leaving.

"That was nothing," said Peter. "What else would anyone do?"

. . . . .

Peter had hired with an Elkton threshing outfit. He was to commence work with the rush season, which the foreman expected, would begin in about a week. That, Peter hoped, would give him time to get his own fall work finished, for the ground might freeze any time now. He was especially concerned about the potatoes, but it would be only a couple of days' work to harvest them, and he still had a week to himself. He was well pleased with his luck when he brought the news home, for he was to run an engine, and an engineer's pay was good. This was on Saturday.

On Sunday morning the thrasher drove out from town to tell him that the farmers were ready for them at once. A man would call for him at five o'clock in the morning. After that they would let him have a car to drive himself home at nights.

Peter came into the house not nearly so elated as he might naturally have been over the prospect of an extra week's wages.

"I wish I had let something else wait and taken up the potatoes," he worried.

"I suppose the threshing couldn't wait a day?" Mary suggested.

"No. That might mean a whole wheat crop snowed under."

"Could you hire Joe Olsen?"

"Joe and Hans are both going threshing too."

"If this were not Sunday we could get right at the potatoes now and I could help you," she ventured.

"No. It's no work for you. We'll just have to take a chance on the weather holding fair. Last year it stayed open till late."

Peter walked about the potato patch several times that day, but if the temptation to go to work in the field came to him at all, it made no headway with his unyielding conscience. If a frost had been threatening at the moment, and if the potatoes had been necessary for their food through the winter, he might have felt justified in breaking the Sabbath to save them, but not when the crop was an object of personal pride rather than a necessity of life, and

when it was still possible that a kindly Providence might still keep the weather fair for them.

Mary came out to the field, too, and brought a basket.

"In case the frost should come, let's have a meal of them for supper," she said. "We'll bake them in their skins, since they're supposed to be so handsome." And she watched carefully to see just how he put the fork under the hill and turned the potatoes rolling out in the loose soil.

Mary had learned to milk the cows. It was not hard work at this time of the year; they were gentle beasts, and while she would never feel perfectly at ease with them, she made a brave pretence of enjoying it, which did not fool Peter at all. He got up half-an-hour earlier in the morning to take care of this extra chore, but it was always done when he came home at night.

"Never again after this year," he promised. "A farmer should stay with his farm. Another year we'll have more stock and more crop here to attend to, and if all goes well, we won't need the extra money so much."

Soon after the sun was up on Monday morning, Mary went to the potato patch and commenced to dig potatoes. She put the fork into the ground as Peter had done, pressed it, lifted it, and turned out a dozen great, white, smooth potatoes. She picked them up and put them in a pail, dug again as Peter had done, so that no potatoes would be missed, and

went on to the next hill. This was not hard work. It was almost fun—for the first half hour. She carried the potatoes, one pailful after another and emptied them in a pile; the pails began to be heavy, but she worked on steadily until noon. When she looked at what she had done, and what remained to do, she could almost have wept. Peter had said he could harvest the crop in two days. At the best she could do it would take her all week.

At noon she rested a while, then went at it again. There was no novelty about it now, just dogged work. But the sun shone warmly for September, and a cool breeze played about, and when she stood up to straighten her aching back, she noticed how blue the sky was and how the squirrels darted here and there on urgent business of their own. No doubt, like herself, they were gathering their stores for winter. She smiled at the idea, and would have liked to mention it to a particularly intelligent looking and perky little squirrel that stood only a few feet off and chattered good-humouredly, but if one spoke in this silence the sound would almost startle oneself.

There was rare peace, here, and security. She thought, with a sharp, new pity, of the hundreds of discouraged, workless men and fearful women and children, facing cold and hunger in the cities of the world. She remembered the noise and hurry of city streets, the flashing on and off of electric signs, the crowds of restless men and women rushing about

at night, seeking excitement or escape from the day's worries. Here, when the day was over, darkness would come down and there would be quiet and stars and firelight. Presently Peter's old car would rattle into the yard, and her world would be complete. She turned again to her digging and worked until sundown.

The weather stayed warm and sunny until Friday. Mary worked until almost dark. Then she brought blankets from the barn and carefully covered the piles of potatoes. If the ground were not frozen in the morning she would have the whole crop saved by noon. And she did. Even as the ground seemed to harden under her fork, and her hands, stiff and roughened, went numb in Peter's old leather gloves, she finished the last row.

Just before dark Peter drove in. He came to the house for a pail; he was going to save a few potatoes for seed, he said; everything would be frozen solid by morning. And Mary let him go.

When he came back, he said nothing—just looked at her. He took her hands and looked at them. They were rough and red and blistered.

"And I thought at least I could save you from work like this," he said.

"Why, any other woman in the settlement would have done it if it needed to be done," she laughed.

"But you're not used to it. You came from a different way of living."

"A lot of women who came from a different way of living have made good pioneers before now. You sort of grow into it."

"I'm afraid you do. And what will it do to you?"

"We'll have to wait and see. Nothing very serious, I imagine."

She was not afraid of anything that life as she found it here would do.

## CHAPTER IX

PETER closed the barn door and stood for a moment to look about him. Never, he thought, had he seen a more beautiful Christmas eve. The snow stretched in a billowy white sweep across the clearing to where the woods stood like a black mountain in the fading light. And there was his house, snug and tight against the weather, the smoke rising in two straight columns from the roof, for they kept a fire in the sitting-room as well as the kitchen now. And fires must never be allowed to go out around Christmas time, Mary said. It was an old family custom to have the whole house warm on Christmas eve, in case an unexpected guest should come.

Peter liked these friendly ways in Mary. Mary had nice ways of looking at everything, he thought. A night like this, now, with purple shadows in the hollows of the snowdrifts, a thin little rim of a moon just above the trees and a star hanging low beside it—Mary would like that. He would go right in and see that she didn't miss it. He knew that she would look and catch her breath at the beauty of it, her eyes starry and wide like a child's, asking him as they often did, how things could be so lovely.

The house door opened and Nettie Culliver came out. This was not as it should be at all. Perhaps she had been "visiting" with Mary all afternoon, and she was not the sort of woman who should visit anyone on Christmas eve or at any time. Her gossip always left a heart-ache with people who liked to think well of their neighbours, and while no one entirely believed her, there was usually something in her stories that was hard to altogether forget. Peter kept out of sight until she was safely on the road; then he went into the house.

The warm air of the kitchen was sweet with the scent of cooking spices and the pine boughs that he and Mary had hung about the house that morning. Through the doorway to the sitting-room he saw some quilts from the spare bedroom airing before the fire. They had just finished the furnishing of this "upstairs room" a few days before. "I could never feel ready for Christmas without a spare bedroom," Mary had said, and Peter had felt that it was good to have a bed ready for a friend or a stranger at any time of the year. They had so much happiness in their little house that they felt sometimes they would like to share it with the whole world.

Mary didn't seem particularly happy at the moment. As Peter had expected, she stood at the window watching the night come down, but she had no word ready about it.

"What's the trouble?" he asked her.

"I was just thinking," said Mary, "that when the shepherds looked up and saw the star, there must have been lots of mud on the hills of Judea if they had wanted to look for that."

"Meaning that Nettie has been talking, I suppose?"

"I happened to say that we were having Mrs. Ritchie and the boys and Jim Irwin here for dinner to-morrow, so she began with them; said no one knew just why Jim had had to leave the Old Country but it was certain that his people sent him money to keep him here."

"No one else around here ever said a word against Jim Irwin."

"And Jack Ritchie, she said, was wild and spent every cent he earned in drinking."

"Couldn't have spent much, with wages as they are, to send his mother the money he has this summer. That brace for Joe's leg, and the trips to the hospital at the Junction, must have cost something. He's been wonderful to Joe, always. There isn't much wrong with Jack."

"Then she started about Dora Whitton. Dora, she said, had met Dick Potter at the Junction the night she ran away from home, and they had taken the train to the city together. And Dora has a baby and has been working out the last while. Yesterday her father had a letter saying that she was coming home for Christmas, and he told the station agent to tell her, if she comes, to take the next train back,

that there is no place for her at home. Of course I reminded her of what Jane Meadows had said of Dora, and I told her that you had liked Dick Potter when he worked around here. Still, however little you believe Nettie, she always leaves something to set you wondering. Oh! and she said a lot about the neighbourhood in general. She's all wrong of course, but . . . I wish we weren't having a dance at the school to-night. It doesn't seem just the right way to spend Christmas eve."

"It won't be the usual dance," Peter assured her. "There's the tree for the children, and being Saturday night, they'll at least be started home before midnight. Don't let it worry you this time and another year we'll plan something better. The folks here are a fine lot. You don't think we'd let it get rough, do you?"

But except for the Christmas tree on the platform, it looked pretty much like "the usual dance" when Peter and Mary arrived. The seats had been moved back to the walls to make a clear dancing floor. A number of families from homesteads farther back in the woods were there—they had been especially invited because of the tree for the children. There was a restlessness among the clumps of young men crowding the doorways. Girls in little bunches twittered away excitedly. Even mothers with babes in arms and children clinging about their knees, were ready for the dance.

Jim Irwin was there with his violin. Jim's playing

was the one thing, Mary thought, that could save an affair like this from commonness. Without knowing why, they all agreed that they had never heard a fiddler like him. He did not play the usual jig tunes, at least not often. He had them dancing to fine old folk songs and strange, unfamiliar airs that haunted the more musical of them for days afterwards. They did not know that sometimes they danced to bits from the world's best operas. And whatever he played at a dance, people's feet just moved of themselves.

When the party got well under way, Jim's music was pretty well drowned in the stamp of feet and the voice of the floor manager. There was nothing of the Old World in the floor manager's performance.

"Salute your partner and pass her by. When you meet her make her fly," he directed. And "Lady round the lady and the gent around the gent. . . . Now the gent around the lady and the lady round the gent. . . . With your right foot up, and your left foot down, take the darling in your arms and swing her once around."

As the dance progressed some of the young people became a bit drunk with it. When the occasion permitted, they bounded across the floor with the abandon of young deer. Sometimes the girls were swung off their feet, and shrill little shrieks and giggles were added to the general racket. There

seemed to be more liberty at a dance in the school than at a party in a private house.

When the evening was well on its way, and some of the women had gone to Joliettes', across the road, to make coffee and get the supper assembled, Jack Ritchie and another young man, a stranger, who had probably driven him out from town, came in. The other boy said something loud and foolish, and—there was no mistaking it—they had both been drinking. There was a little stir, then Mary saw Peter walk over, help Jack into the overcoat he had taken off, open the door for them and follow them out.

"You don't think we'd let things get rough?" Peter had said, so she supposed these boys had to be turned out of the party. She wanted to run after them, to tell Peter to let them stay, however badly they might behave. Of course Peter must know what he was doing—he was the most understanding person; but it was all wrong somehow.

Peter came back presently, and she asked him if Jack had gone home. It would not be surprising to hear that he had gone back to town, since he hadn't seemed wanted there.

"Gone home?" Peter repeated. "Oh no. It seems he had a drink in town; isn't used to it and didn't know how it would act; so he isn't just himself. I took both of them over to Joliettes' to have something to eat. Mrs. Ritchie's looking

after them. Jack'll be all right in a little while. I'm afraid the other lad peddles it around a bit, but you can't be hard on anyone on Christmas eve. He'll be going back to town as soon as he's had his supper."

So that was how they took care of their social standards and their erring brothers at the same time, in this new, "wild" country!

Supper was over and the last doll and jack-in-the-box had been distributed from the tree. The lamps had been turned low when the candles were lighted, and soft lights and shadows played about the school room. The littlest children had gone to sleep, and the older folk chatted quietly about the fire. Then a young voice called out that there was still time for another dance before midnight, and they went to find Jim Irwin.

They brought him in and he took up his violin, touched the strings gently, put it down again and seemed uncertain what to do next. A few eager young dancers had taken their places on the floor, but he did not seem to see them; his eyes were on the tree with its glittering star and flickering candles. Then he began to play, and after a few bars, to sing:

"Oh little town of Bethlehem,  
How still we see thee lie;  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by."

Jim's voice was a call to sing as irresistible as his playing was an invitation to dance. One by one, rather shyly they joined him—men's voices that had once sung in village choirs but were now rusty from disuse, women's voices shrill and sweet and a little unsteady, here and there an alto or a tenor feeling its way into harmony, children's piercing little trebles, and one or two that had no sense of tune whatever, but under the spell of Jim's music felt an overpowering urge to sing.

Mary's heart was singing, too. This one half-hour of beauty would atone for whatever might have been amiss in the hours before. She could imagine just how this young Englishman, living alone in a raw, new country, and seeing the candles guttering out on a Christmas tree, had suddenly gone homesick for the carol singing of the homeland, and she was not surprised when, in the middle of a verse, he laid down his fiddle and staggered to the door.

Peter was losing no time in following him. He stopped to tell her that he might be gone a while.

"Jim's drunk," he said. "He never lets himself go like this when he isn't; and with Jim, this is bad."

And as if this were not enough, the door that had closed on Jim staggering out, opened on its return swing for Dora Whitton to stagger in. No "Down East" melodrama could have presented a more

pathetic picture of the outcast daughter, turned from her father's door with her baby in her arms, and no wedding ring on her finger—somehow they all noticed that as soon as her gloves were off. But the women flocked around to take the baby, and some of the men brought wood and poked up the fire—it was about all a man could do.

She explained to Mary that the station agent had given her her father's message; there was no one to meet her so she had begged a ride part way and walked the rest, carrying her baby and the little satchel. Could she go home with her for the night? Of course she could. Any one of them would have taken her home with them. Mary wondered if the same hospitality would be found in many communities where the homes had more to give.

One after another, the men brought their horses from the shed and took their families off home. When Peter drove up, Jim Irwin was lying asleep under a blanket, on the straw in the bottom of the sleigh. Peter put his violin in beside him, loaded Mary and Dora and the baby into the front seat, and standing up behind them, drove carefully off down the road. Their way took them past Jim's shack but they did not stop.

"We couldn't leave him as he is, in that house with no fire," Peter said, and though he was not asking Mary if they might take him home, there was something of an appeal in the way he said it; for it is rather hard for a woman who has

been so proud of her guest room, that its first occupant should be—well, not himself at least. . . . Then there were Dora and the baby, too.

“We can manage, can’t we?” he added.

“Of course we can,” said Mary.

They got Jim safely stowed away in the spare room. Dora insisted on sleeping on the couch in the sitting-room. She was so dazed with weariness that she was not very coherent.

“Dick’s going on the place next his brother’s, up the township,” she told them. “He’s moving some things, and he’ll be coming this way. I’ll be where I can hear his bells.”

Mary wondered if the girl were delirious.

“A lot of bells *she’ll* hear,” yawned Peter as they left her. “Looks as if she could sleep for a week.”

“There’ll be no bells,” said Mary. Her faith in humanity was at a low ebb. Nettie Culliver’s tales were not pleasant, but they seemed to have a way of coming true.

When they wakened in the morning a sunlight of pure gold was pouring into the room. There were sounds of a snow shovel grating on the door step and a baby singing away in the kitchen.

“Our visitors seem to have come to life,” said Peter, and bestirred himself at once. The missionary from Elkton was having a service in the school at

eleven o'clock and Peter must be there early to have everything in order. The Joliettes would see that a fire was started before they left for mass in town. So there was great bustling about, and calls of good wishes from room to room, and an eagerness to get out to the kitchen to see if the baby was really as happy as he sounded to be. All washed and dressed, he waved his feet in the air and signalled that he was ready for any fun that might be going. He was a beautiful, strong baby. Whatever shadows may have fallen on his mother, life for him so far, had evidently been "one grand, sweet song."

Jim had intended to go home as soon as he had had a word with Mary. He was as ashamed of the trouble he had caused and as grateful for their kindness as a fine and sensitive man could be. But they made short work of his apologies. And of course he must stay for breakfast; he had promised to be there for dinner anyway. So they had breakfast with the yellow sunshine spilling across the table, and toast browned over wood coals, and coffee pouring clear amber from the pot and filling the house with its fragrance.

Jim didn't care to go to church, so they left him with the responsibility of keeping the fires going and watching the chickens roasting in the oven. Dora wanted very much to go, so the three of them and the baby, of course, drove off through the snapping zero weather, with the frost making white

feathers on the horses' flanks and the sun burning with a warm glow wherever it touched. The cold kept no one away from church on the few Sundays when the missionary could come to them. They liked to meet their neighbours; they enjoyed the singing; they listened to every word of the sermon, except occasionally when, driven by long working hours, some of them fell asleep. And they usually took the preacher's messages to themselves in an honest and practical way. To-day when he spoke of the inn that had no room for the Mother and Child, Peter and Mary thought of Dora and her pitiful hope that Dick Potter might be coming this way.

And incredibly, he came—opened the door quietly and slipped into a chair beside the wood-box. If anyone expected anything dramatic in his meeting with Dora they were disappointed. He nodded across to her rather casually, and directed his attention to the service. It was Dora who did the surprising thing. When Peter came around with the collection plate, she asked him to ask the minister if she could have the baby christened after the service.

Certainly, the minister said; he would be happy to christen the baby and added, "By the way, what do we do about water, with everything frozen hard as nails?" But this was simple to the steward of a frontier church, simpler than another problem that worried him. He took the fire shovel from the stove,

went out and plunged it into a snow drift a few times to clean it, brought in a shovelful of snow, put it on one of the tin collection plates, melted it over the stove and handed it to the minister. Then he took his courage in his hands, and under cover of the congregational singing he asked:

"I suppose you couldn't marry a couple here to-day?"

"Does someone want to be married?"

"I don't know, I just took it on myself to ask. But I wondered—with the baby being baptized and all—if Dick and Dora . . ."

"But I married them over a year ago, the night Dora left here, I think. They came to the manse in rather a hurry, and were married and went on to the city on the next train. I remember Dick hadn't enough money left after he got the tickets to buy a ring. Maybe he hasn't been able to get one since. They've had it rather hard, with work so scarce; but he's been down south threshing for the last few months, and Dora has worked out some. I understand they're going on a farm somewhere now."

The minister announced that there would be a baptismal service. Dora came forward with the baby, and Dick rose from his chair by the wood-box and joined them. Later Dora explained to Mary that they had this planned between themselves, if Dick could just manage to get along in time, with the long

trip he had to make and weather and roads uncertain. But he had made it. Somehow you could always depend on Dick.

Never, thought Mary, as they rode home through the frosty noon day, had she seen a Christmas so clean and lovely. Never had she been more pleased with the friends who would spend the day under her roof. When they got home, Jim had the table set in fine style. He had put on Peter's snowshoes and gone to the woods for pine cones, and had arranged them in a cunning basket of woven twigs. This was his table centre, a sort of floral offering to Mary. No one seemed to know just why, but you always had a nice party if you had Jim Irwin there. He had a way of saying the right things, of getting everyone talking and happy. And it was not just because he was educated and travelled and had a background of gentle breeding, Mary decided. He had the rarer gift of an understanding heart.

Mrs. Ritchie and her boys came, Jack pulling little Joe on the sled. He had Joe outfitted with a fine new suit with brass buttons, and new boots that must have taken his savings for some time. Joe was doing so well with his exercises, he told the party, that the doctor said he could soon go without his brace altogether. And Mrs. Ritchie confided to each individually, as the opportunity came, that she didn't know how they would ever get along without Jack.

After dinner Jim played and they all sang. When someone begged him to tell a story, he gave them "The Cricket on the Heath," so completely and so vividly, that the little parlour was peopled with the genial carrier and his young wife and their strange guest and all the lesser characters, as realistically as a whole troupe on the stage could have done it. When he had finished they were startled to find that dusk was closing in.

They must hurry away then. The Potters had a long drive to Dick's brother's place where they would spend the night. The Ritchies had their chores to do. Jim said he had letters to write. Peter and Mary said good-bye and watched them on their way. Nothing that Nettie Culliver could say would shake their faith in anyone after this. There was no telling, anyway, whether her tales were altogether untrue or worse because the truth in them was so distorted as to be even more misleading. They were especially concerned for Jim as they watched him, with his violin, crossing the clearing in long, easy strides, on the way to his lonely shack in the woods.

"I know now why he stays here," Peter said. "He's taking a few years by himself, to fight the thing that beat him among his old friends. I wonder if Nettie Culliver will ever be as brave about taking to the woods when she feels the thirst for a good slander bust coming on."

"It was a nice party, wasn't it?" Mary asked him.

"A fine party."

"And aren't they wonderful people?"

"Great people," he agreed.

## CHAPTER X

THE long winter nights close in early in the North Country, and sometimes while dusk is settling in the east, the sky in the west flames into colours of breath-taking loveliness. On nights like these, Mary was grateful for her kitchen's west window. On cold days it was hard to keep the glass from frosting over, even with two wood fires going, but about this time of the day, Peter would come in from the woods, and with a few turns of the poker would set the fires roaring, and the most stubborn frost melting from the panes. They seldom missed a sunset.

One evening in January, as they stood at the window, a team and sleigh came labouring out of the woods, stopped at the gate and turned in. The sleigh was piled with a load of something that looked like "a moving," but where would anyone be moving to in the bush, in the middle of winter?

"Surely it wouldn't be the people coming to 'The Travellers' Rest'?" Mary asked.

"The Travellers' Rest" was an ill-fated homestead two miles north. Early in the settling of the district someone had filed on the land, built a shack and a barn, done a little clearing and left it. Twice since then, other settlers had taken it over, stayed

for a year or two and given it up again. Some people said that the big timber on the land was discouraging to an axe-man; Tony Marotta declared there was a "jinx" over the place; that ill-luck hounded it.

The sleigh had stopped in the yard. Peter was already at the door and when he opened it, a woman's sharp, high scream cut through the air. They both ran out then. The man was out of the sleigh, almost beside himself. Was there a doctor anywhere near? His wife had had a cold when they left home a week ago, but they didn't know it was so bad. For the last hour, a pain in her side had been stabbing like a knife.

"Every—time—I—breathe," the girl explained, and the last word went off in a cry again.

They could not tell them that there was not a doctor within call. They carried the woman into the house and while Peter put the team in the barn, and with his own fastest horse went for Mrs. Joliette—everyone in the settlement went for Mrs. Joliette in an emergency of illness—Mary and the young husband did what they could with blankets and hot drinks. But the pain was there with every breath, and the girl was shaking with a nervous chill. Mary was terrified, and surprised at how well she could keep it to herself. She felt years older than these young things, so pitifully ignorant of the hardships of a new country in winter, but she had had no experience to help her to deal with suffering like this. If only Mrs. Joliette were there!

Mrs. Joliette was there with no unnecessary delay. She bustled into the house, cheerful and competent, carrying the little basket of supplies that she always took with her on her sick calls.

"Pleurisee," she pronounced, when she had heard the first cry. As she spoke she lifted the tea kettle to see if there was hot water ready.

"You got some empty sealer'? We make hot water bottle'," she said to Mary. "Is d'ere bed, spare?"

There was the spare room upstairs, of course, but that would be chilly. Immediately Mary was making up her own bed for the stranger. Then she was filling glass jars with hot water, while Mrs. Joliette went briskly about making poultices. She had brought some "pain pills" that a doctor had once recommended to her, and which she administered with great discretion when the occasion seemed to demand them. She gave one to the woman and sent her husband to get her to bed.

"Kip man busy an' save dem lose deir head," she smiled when they were out of hearing.

Half-an-hour later, the girl under layers of blankets, with the bottles of hot water making an oven of the bed, and a warm poultice quieting the pain in her side, no longer cried out. Another half-hour and she drowsed, coming back to wakefulness every few minutes with a terrified start, believing that she was still driving through endless woods, with demons of pain snatching at her at every breath. Finally she slept.

There was tense stillness in the little house. Out in the kitchen Peter and Mary and the young man—Ed Archer he said was his name—talked in whispers, and every few minutes one of them tiptoed to the sitting-room where Mrs. Joliette sat by the fire, her eyes sleepy but her ears alert for any sound from the sick-room. She would nod to assure them that all was as well as could be expected, and they would go out again. At regular intervals she came to the kitchen stove for a fresh poultice. It was long past midnight when she came back to them with the light of triumph on her face.

“She soakin’ now wit’ sweat,” she announced. “She be all right. I t’ink she don’ wake ’fore morning.”

They remembered then that they had had no supper, so Mary put a meal on the table and they all sat down together, and Ed Archer told them how they had come to set out for a homestead in the middle of winter.

They had been married in the summer and soon after that the factory, where he was a shipping clerk, had closed; so he was out of work. He knew that a lot of people were going north, and while he didn’t know much about farming, he had done a little harvesting in the years when there were harvests, and farmers were glad to get help of any sort. His wife had been a school teacher but she liked the country. If they waited in the city until spring they would have no savings left to buy a team and the

few other things they needed. The Land Agent had told them that there were buildings on the place they were going to, and they were sure they could manage, somehow; but they had never thought of anything like this.

"I can't think what might have happened if you hadn't taken us in," he said, tried to say more and could not.

"We're only glad you got this far," Mary assured him. "We haven't too many neighbours. We like to see people coming in." But she was wishing that people so ill-fitted for what was before them need not have to try to cope with the demands of this new country. Peter looked a bit concerned, she thought, and Mrs. Joliette's brown eyes were shrewd and motherly as Ed talked of his plans, but none of them said anything to discourage him. He had worry enough as it was.

They were likeable young people, the Archers. The girl was sweet and fine, and Ed, inexperienced as he was, was ready to undertake any amount of work to get a start on his place. The next morning Peter left his own wood-cutting and went to help with whatever must be done to make the place ready for moving in. The barn walls, built of logs, were solid enough, but the roof was badly broken, so they cut poles to mend it, and at noon, in the warmth of the Shoedecker kitchen, Peter whittled out wooden hinges for the door. They had scarcely started their work again in the afternoon when

Hans Olsen came along. He had heard their axes in the morning, he said—that was explanation enough for his coming. He went to work with them. The next day the Joliettes were there. They brought a load of straw on their sleigh—straw was something a new settler did not bring with him, however well equipped he might be in other ways, and the Joliettes had been farming here long enough to have a fair supply of it. Ed wanted to buy hay for his horses; he had been told there would be hay in the district. Sure, they said, they had all put up hay for the winter, but they never sold hay among neighbours; they would give him a load, now and then, as he needed it to get through his first winter.

Tony Marotta came with his hammer and nails and helped to make the house weather-tight.

“Sometime’ I tink, da spook she hide in da wall,” he said, as he looked the place over. “Wan fella he come, stay year, he go. Nodder, he come, stay two, t’ree mont’, he get scare’ too. She not bad house.”

He tapped the walls here and there as if to assure himself that the logs were solid and harboured no “spooks.” He was looking for loose plaster. When he found a hole he chinked it with a mixture of mud and straw.

Ed himself set up the little cook-stove they had brought with them, scrubbed the floor and arranged their meagre furnishings.

"They need another stove," Peter said to Mary, that night. "A cook-stove alone won't begin to heat a house like that in the winters we have here."

"There's our little rancher's stove," she suggested, and added practically, "I only use it in the summer to boil clothes, or do some cooking in the shack. They could have it now and bring it back in the spring."

And they did that. It was strange how all sorts of things, stoves and stove pipes, ploughs and cultivators, even a spare horse or a clucking hen, moved about the settlement, doing duty wherever they were needed, until their original owners might be a little embarrassed about claiming them again.

The day before Ed was to bring his wife home, Mrs. Joliette drove up to his door. Under layers of blankets, the back of her sleigh was loaded with sacks of vegetables and parcels containing cuts of meat, or a few pounds of butter, or a jar of preserves such as the neighbours had brought to the Shoe-deckers when Mary came.

"We mak' always shower for new familie," she explained to Ed, "an' bring somet'ing w'at we grow or mak' ouse'f. But I say to neighbor, 'Mis' Archer not strong enough for party yet.' I tell dem I drive roun' an' gadder all de stoff; be same t'ing."

She came in for a minute to warm her hands at the fire; she praised the way he had fixed up the house; she asked him to bring his wife over as soon as she was well enough to come; and she went

on her way. She wore her husband's fur cap and his overcoat. She guided her team over the winding, snow-drifted trail with capable assurance. She was as truly a châtelaine in her sphere as any woman of Old France, carrying the keys to a household of some dignity, and holding a position of power and respect in the community.

That night light shone in the windows, and smoke rose from the roof of another house on Poplar Hill. The settlement was growing.

## CHAPTER XI

SPRING came again, and when the snow had gone, they could see more plainly how the landscape had changed in a year. With the chopping Peter had been doing all winter, the forest had been pushed back almost unbelievably. As soon as the frost was out of the ground he would take out the roots, then the thresher from Elkton would come with his tractor and breaking-plough and they would have another piece of new land.

"It's not more than five acres but it's land I've made myself," Peter said to Mary as they looked it over together, and his face was alight with the joy of an artist who looks at a picture of his own making and finds it good. "I'll sow it in wheat. Think what it will mean to see wheat growing on our own land. We'll have feed grains on the rented place again, but on our own clearings, especially here by the house, where we can see it every day, I want wheat; it sort of gives you the feeling that you're in the business of feeding the world.

"You won't have so many mosquitoes to bother this year, either, with the bush farther back from the house," he went on with a grin.

But he wasn't taking the mosquitoes lightly. Some of his logs he had sawed into lumber, and

before the first warm days came he built a screened porch across the front of the house. This was a luxury. Some of the neighbours thought it was carrying things a little too far for a new country like this. The wire screening must have cost something, and it would rust out in two winters, they said. But he assured them that the screen would not rust. Before winter he would board it over on the outside and make a protective shed over the kitchen door. It was a thrifty idea; it would keep the house warmer; it would even save firewood. "As if anyone wanted to save firewood in the forest!" they came back at him; the big job if you wanted to make a farm was to get rid of wood as fast as you could.

Peter found a warm satisfaction in building the porch. It meant that they were not sacrificing everything to the land; that as they could afford it, they would have a better home. And things would be easier soon. They had two fresh cows this spring—every settler seemed to have increased his herd by another cow or two during the year, and the Elkton creamery was sending a truck to the Hill twice a week to collect cream; that meant a "cash crop" the year round. And a cash crop always brought little extras for the house and the family. Oh, they were getting along fine. He knew, too, that because of the porch he had built, there would be other screened porches in the settlement before another year was over. It was good to see your own ideas spreading through the community.

He had ploughed the yard about the house and seeded it with grass, and in the evenings he worked at making a picket fence to keep the chickens away from the garden and the flowers. The pickets were only narrow slabs, waste pieces from the saw mill, but they made a good fence. Mary helped at this. Sometimes in the lengthening spring evenings they worked until dark, and as she handed him nails or pickets, watched the sure swing of his hammer and saw the fence lengthening yard by yard, she knew why Mrs. Eraschuck had found it so good, "in her young life" to work with her man, stooking wheat in the moonlight.

Mary was fitting into the pioneer life in other ways, too. One morning Ed Archer came with his horses and waggon. He had to go to town, he said, and Alice wasn't well. She had fainted that morning and he didn't like to leave her alone. He wondered if Mary could come and stay with her while he was away.

"If Pete could manage about his dinner I could take you back with me now," he said, a bit anxiously. "I don't like to leave her alone long."

Peter could manage about his dinner, all right, but it was baking day; the dough for the week's bread was rising in the pan by the oven door. She could not waste the bread; neither could she refuse to go to a sick neighbour. Of course she would go. She left a note for Peter, wrapped a blanket around the pan of dough, and took it and her baking pans

with her. While she visited with Alice Archer she made and baked the bread, and she brought it home with her in the evening—at least she brought home part of it; the Archers' supply was low and Alice might not be well enough to do a baking for a few days.

Again the cycle of seed time and haying, harvest and threshing went around. Peter took the threshing of his grain almost as a religious rite. He brought a handful of wheat to the house for Mary to see. It looked like any other wheat to her, but she was proud of it because it was Peter's work. She had been more thrilled by the field of waving grain and later the patch of yellow stubble set so incongruously in the heart of the woods. Their other crops had flourished, too. The summer had been good to them. And now, almost unnoticed came the turn of the year again.

. . . . .

It was a Sunday afternoon in September. There had been frosts earlier in the month, but on this afternoon a summer warmth drowsed over the land. Farther off through the clearing, a purple haze hung in the air and a dazzling, low light played among the yellowing poplars. A strange light, Mary thought, as she stood at the door and looked out as she had done a score of times that day—a light that seemed hurried, knowing its time was short, for already the evenings darkened early and a dozen signs told that winter was just around the corner.

Perhaps it was something eerie in the atmosphere that filled her with foreboding, for she had been restless all day. Perhaps a whole day of idleness was too much for people as busy as she and Peter were through the rest of the week. The missionary from Elkton still held a service in the school once a month, but this was not one of his days. She went to the piano and played some old songs and Peter came and tried to sing them—he was very watchful to see that things went as happily as possible for her these days. They decided to take a walk down the trail—the trails through the bush were lovely at this time of the year; the thinning foliage let the sun in, the dry leaves rustled at their feet, squirrels darted about, and the chill in the air as the sun went low would send them home grateful for their own fireside. They walked in the wheel-tracks, their shoulders touching sometimes, saying little, feeling very close.

They were turning in at their own gate when they heard a rifle-shot from the direction of the Archer place.

“Ed must be shooting rabbits,” Peter remarked.

Then the report came again, one shot after another in quick succession, a settler’s distress signal to his neighbours. In less than two minutes Peter had a horse saddled and was on the road.

“I don’t think it’s fire; you can’t see any smoke, can you?” he said as he was leaving. “Maybe some of the stock in trouble.”

In twenty minutes he was back. Mary heard the horse's hoofs half a mile away and met him at the gate. His face was white and horror-stricken.

"It's Alice," he said. "Convulsions. I'm going for the doctor. I stopped at Olsen's and Mrs. Olsen's on her way over. Joe's gone for Mrs. Joliette."

"I'll go too," said Mary.

"I wonder if you should," he worried. He had had just a glimpse of Alice when a convulsion was at its worst, and he did not want Mary to see anything like that—especially now when there was a baby of her own coming.

"Of course I'll go. Don't worry about me. And don't wait," she urged him.

He was off again at a gallop. It would be a ten-mile ride to the nearest telephone. If the doctor happened to be in Elkton he might be out in a couple of hours; if he was at the hospital at the Junction—and that was his headquarters—he could not get to Poplar Hill before midnight at the earliest. Mrs. Joliette would do what she could, of course, but this was no ordinary case. Hurrying to the house, Mary remembered that in convulsions the patient was sometimes wrapped in blankets wrung out of hot water. The Archers might not have an extra blanket, so she got some of her own and started down the trail; she must not let herself go into a panic; she must not let herself faint if things were

as bad as she feared they would be; but she hoped Mrs. Joliette would be there before her.

While she was still some distance from the end of the trail, she heard the Joliettes' horse galloping down the cross road. One of the boys was driving, and Mrs. Joliette was clinging to the seat as the sturdy, home-made buggy bumped over the roots and hummocks of the bush trail. Mary had still a mile to walk, and when she arrived the little French woman was in charge of things, giving orders with a coolness that steadied the rest of them, but which did not quite hide her own fear. Mrs. Olsen was there first; she had put water to heat and had done what she could. Hans had driven her over and he still waited about outside, in case there might be anything he could do.

The next few hours were a nightmare that none of them would ever forget—a confusion of steaming blankets and the distorted face and writhing body of the girl when the spells were on, a man crying out loud sometimes in agony and defeat, and through it all, Mrs. Joliette fighting back death with what skill she had, and all the odds against her. With tears swimming in her eyes but with hands sure and steady she worked and gave her orders like the veteran nurse she was. She remembered to tell Ed that his wife was not conscious of the spasms that twisted and strangled her. And she prayed steadily as she worked. When there was nothing more she could do, she slipped the crucifix

from her breast and put it into the dead girl's hands.

The doctor arrived three hours later. He had come all the way from the Junction. There should be a doctor at Elkton, he said; they should have a Red Cross Hospital there, with all the young settlers coming into the district. But they scarcely heard him. They could think of nothing just then but the death of the woman who had been their neighbour, and the grief of her husband. . . . He would take them away to-morrow—his wife who had lived only twenty-three years, and their baby who had never lived at all. He would take them back to the South where doctors were within reach of everyone.

"What a country to bring a woman to!" he said to Peter, and was so blinded with his trouble that he did not see how Peter's mouth tightened and how his eyes turned quickly to his own wife.

There were hard things to be done in the desolate house that night. The doctor made the necessary arrangements when he got back to town, and in the morning Peter took his light waggon to meet the train and brought back the casket. Almost before it was daylight—for no one tried to sleep that night—Mary saw him bring water and wash the waggon, polish the box free of every bit of dust, and spread a clean blanket over the bottom; the waggon would be taking them to meet the train going south in

the evening; there was no hearse to carry the dead in this backwoods.

Mary had had no chance to speak to Peter alone. All night the women had moved about the house, busy and quiet—Mrs. Joliette, Mrs. Olsen and Mary. Pierre Joliette, Hans and Peter had sat in the kitchen, moving out of doors occasionally when they felt themselves in the way, feeling less uncomfortable when the women found something for them to lift or help with. Ed did not move far from the bed in the next room, and sometimes his sobbing broke through the quiet of the place.

He would not be coming back to the North, he said, so there were his things to pack, too. Mrs. Joliette asked him what dress she would put on Alice and he went to a trunk and brought out her wedding dress—white silk worn just once, and slim white slippers to go with it; there was a tiny scuff across the toe of one where it had rubbed against the black of a man's shoe. The men about the stove looked away while Mary ironed out the dress and tried to keep her tears from spotting it. . . . Some time in the night the Eraschucks came, and before morning Mrs. Eraschuck and Mrs. Olsen had a washing on the line; and so on into the day they went about making things ready for the going away.

There would be no funeral. To meet the train, they must leave by four o'clock; there was no time to send word about the settlement, and the missionary

was miles away on his three-township circuit. But by two o'clock Mrs. Ritchie and Tony Marotta and his wife, and a few settlers from farther back, who had heard in some way, straggled in. And Jane Meadows came; Peter had stopped to tell her on his way to town. They sat in tense quiet and heard the clock tick and looked at Ed in dumb sympathy. Finally Peter went to him and asked if they should leave soon.

"She'd have liked some sort of service," Ed replied, "and there isn't even a minister."

He took a Bible from the table and handed it to Peter.

"Could you read something?" he asked.

A red spot appeared on Peter's forehead, another on one cheek, but he took the Book. He turned the leaves slowly. There was the part about the "many mansions." He knew where to find it, for when his mother had died and he was a boy of fourteen, unable to unburden his grief to anyone, he had clung to it for comfort, shutting himself in his room, crying his heart out and reading it over and over when everyone thought he was asleep.

"'Let not your heart be troubled'," he read, "'ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.'"

He read on to the end of the promise and stopped. There were other passages that should be read, he

knew—not the one from Job, “Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.” That was usually read at funerals but no one here to-day could stand it. But there was one: “And I saw a great host that no man could number”; that would be in Revelation, no doubt, but he did not know just where. . . . There should be a prayer, and what could he do? He could not pray out loud before people. Never in his life had he done such a thing. Also it would have been quite as impossible for him to utter a word that he did not feel in a prayer, as it would be for him to say what he did not mean in ordinary conversation; and what prayer was there but a cry for help at a time like this? A death like this was beyond understanding. He could feel only an aching pity and a horrible, personal fear. He looked at the closed Book in his hands, dumb and ashamed of his dumbness.

But Jane Meadows knew about death. It had taken her husband when they were young together and her daughter just at the time when life promised her everything, and now with the vision of later years, she could not think of it with bitterness. And she could pray. She went on her knees on the rough, bare floor and prayed for comfort for Ed Archer as a mother might pray for her son in trouble. She quoted promises that had helped her through the black watches of lonely nights; and because she so wholly believed what she said, she made the hope of reunion something real and not so far away.

It was time to go. The men placed the casket in the rough box and lifted it into the waggon. Mrs. Joliette spread a blanket over it, wrapping it around carefully as if she would protect the girl and her baby from the cold that was already creeping up from the swamp as the sun lowered. Ed shook hands with everyone and could not speak, but they knew he was grateful for the little they had been able to do. Then he climbed up beside Peter and they drove slowly away. One of the Joliette boys followed in another waggon with their trunks. And the little house was empty again.

Peter had just a minute with Mary before they left. There was so much he wanted to say, but all he could do was to tell her that Bane Olsen, the younger Olsen boy who sometimes did chores for him now, was going to drive her home and stay to do the milking, and that she was to go straight to bed; he would be home as soon as he could. He was amazed at her calmness. It seemed that she, who might have been so fearful after this, was the bravest of them all.

But later when she was alone, she was not so brave. There was something terrifying about this wilderness with no doctor anywhere near and a baby coming. She had not known that there could be suffering like Alice Archer's, but that was not what mattered most. The baby had been so little—so lovely too, but they were all glad it had not lived when its mother was dead. . . . To die and leave

a child like this was something you just couldn't think about. Of course, it would be safe with Peter, but what about leaving Peter? Without ever thinking much about it, she had supposed death would not seem so unnatural when it came. Now the loneliness of going off to another world was frightening.

The wind blew up cold from the swamp. She kindled the fire and lighted the lamp and called Bane into supper, but she did not eat anything herself. When he had gone she cleared the table—Peter was taking Ed to Jane Meadows' for supper on their way to the train. It would be two hours yet before he could get home. Darkness came early, and the wind swishing among the trees blew a branch against the window. She started and almost cried out. Cold chills rolled in waves up and down her body; one terror after another chased through her brain. She went to bed and lay there shivering; finally she let go, and cried and couldn't stop.

Peter's waggon creaked into the yard and her courage returned. She put out the light—he must not see her like this; he must not know she had been crying. He opened the outside door, careful not to make a noise. She heard him take off his shoes, heard him wash at the sink, but he did not make a light. He came into the room very quietly and she pretended to be asleep; if he knew she was awake he might light the lamp. Only when he had eased himself into bed, she stirred and spoke, and

when he answered it was *his* voice that was choked and broken, and she who was reassuring him.

Still, as usual, Peter's forethought was taking care of things.

"I went to see the doctor after the train left," he told her. "This was his day in Elkton—he comes once a week. And I'm to take you in to see him next week and every so often from then on. He said Alice would have been all right if she'd been seeing a doctor. And we'll take no chance on a baby being born here. We'll go to the hospital at the Junction, and we'll see that you're there in lots of time. . . . But . . ."—and now he was undone—"I didn't know it was anything like that! If anything was to happen——"

She was ages older than he was in wisdom now and stronger in courage, the eternal mother; and very firmly she said,

"I'm going to tell you this now and we won't speak of it again, for nothing is going to happen—we won't let anything happen. But if it should, I want you to know that I wouldn't have had things different—not any way—ever since I came here. Always remember that."

. . . . .

The next Sunday was the missionary's day for church service in the school. Jane Meadows had come out with him, and everyone in the settlement was there except the Joliettes and Marottas, who

were Catholic. Even the Joliette boys in their Sunday clothes were waiting in the yard when the congregation came out; it was as near as they could go to attending a Protestant Church service. Alice Archer's death had shaken the entire community, and the people wanted to get together to talk of it. The missionary was sorry he could not have been with them. He spoke of the blessing it was to have a woman like Mrs. Joliette in the community, and of the comfort there was in time of bereavement, in a spirit of neighbourliness such as prevailed in the district. He reminded them of the uncertainty of life and the omnipresence of death, even in places with better means to fight it than were available here; and he announced that after the service Mrs. Meadows would have a word to say to them.

Jane said she had come on Sunday because it seemed the most likely time to get most of the people of the settlement together. "And," she continued, "I thought if there would ever be a time when you would be interested in what I have to say, it would be now. We must all realize now, if we had never thought of it before, how badly we need a full time doctor in the district. No doctor could afford to come here on his own; he couldn't live on the fees we could pay, with so much of the country not opened up yet. But we have a system of State medicine in Saskatchewan now that would give us a Government doctor, only we haven't troubled to get together as a district and ask for one. If we

were willing to work for it we could have a Red Cross hospital, too—and we need a hospital almost as much as we need a doctor. My husband hoped to see one in his time, but there was no State medicine then, and when we came in, and for years after, there were only a few settlers scattered about at the end of the railway. The last year has brought in more settlers than any ten years before. We could reasonably ask for a hospital now and I'm sure the Red Cross wouldn't refuse us if we'd do our part."

"What would we have to do?" Peter asked.

"We'd have to put up a building and I suppose supply fuel and do such things as we could, since so many are just starting on their farms and won't have any money for a few years."

Peter thought it would not be hard to get logs and free labour to do the building. John Eraschuck had a portable saw-mill and offered to saw the lumber. Someone suggested that the business men of Elkton, the store-keepers, creamery men and the bank might contribute the hardware. They appointed Jane Meadows and Peter as a committee to investigate and see just how they could get things started.

And Peter went into it wholeheartedly. The hospital would not be ready for a year at the earliest; it would not be there when Mary would need a hospital this winter, but it was strange perhaps (or was it natural to a man like Peter?) that the

harder his personal anxieties pressed, the more keenly he felt the needs of his neighbours. It seemed that the death of Alice Archer had shaken them all into an awareness that life, even in a pioneer's country, is more than cutting trees and clearing land; that birth and death, joy and suffering, youth and middle life and old age go on; and that the business of making a living is only incidental to living itself.

On the way home he said to Mary,

"When we get a hospital, the next thing we need is a Church—not just a building; the school will do for that for a while—I mean a Church of people. We've been content to go and listen to a minister once a month, take what he has to give us and not do anything ourselves. I don't mean you, or the women; I mean men, like myself. When I think, at Archer's that day, that I didn't even know where to find what I should have found to read!"

"But you read the best part and you knew where to find it."

"Only because I knew it when I was fourteen years old. It seems I haven't learned much since. My father or my grandfather would have known what to do. And it's no one's fault but my own. Or is it? Maybe it's partly the fault of older men where I've lived since. They've been a decent lot, too, but like myself, a little too anxious about crops and things."

"Not you, Peter," his wife protested. "You

put the real things first better than anyone else I know."

"When it comes close home, in our own affairs, maybe a little," he admitted gratefully, "but not in a big enough way. People are coming in here fast, from all sorts of places. It's time some of us who are here first, made up our minds that we aren't going to have a 'wild and woolly West'."

## CHAPTER XII

ANN SEVERN wrote that she was coming for a visit, "just a stop-over between trains"; she would come one afternoon and go back the next.

"Ann's afraid to commit herself to staying longer in the wilds," Mary laughed. "We'll show her that it isn't so bad after all." She was glad Ann was coming. "But we won't have time to show her *anything*," she regretted. "It will be dark when she gets here, and she'll have to leave right after noon the next day to get the train back."

"What will she think of driving sixteen miles from town in a home-made buggy?" Peter wondered.

Mary thought she would not mind it.

"I think you get quite a thrill out of the trip the first time," she said. "I remember I did. . . . We'll have a real dinner party for her," she went on. "Let's ask Jim Irwin to come and give it some atmosphere, and bring his violin. She'll think we grow musicians in the bush."

They were very gay about the preparations for their guest. Before Peter went to meet her, he washed the buggy and polished it until it shone in the spots where there was paint. Mary dressed two of her spring chickens and made a pumpkin pie,

very flaky of crust and spiced as Peter said his mother used to do it. She would have wild cranberry jelly and baked potatoes and cauliflower with a cheese sauce and tiny pickled beets and celery sweet and crisp from the earth—Peter said it was the new bush ground that made celery grow so well up here—and little hot rolls—a dinner almost entirely grown on their own land. Some marigolds in the garden were still untouched by the frost, so she put them in a bowl in the centre of the table and brought out her candle-sticks and yellow candles.

In the flicker of candle light, the sitting-room was lovely, with its log walls and the colour she had put into it—the rust and blue of an Indian print, the painted shelves, and books, and rugs, and the home-made couch that she and Peter had upholstered with a brick and blue hempen carpet. The warmth of wood fires filled the house. The savour of cooking spice and sage and roasting chickens hung about the kitchen. A welcoming kitchen was especially important in a pioneer farm house, for that was the room a visitor always came to first. . . . It was fine to have a home like this to offer to one's friends.

Ann said it was charming. She had enjoyed the ride out—she couldn't remember when she had had a drive with horses, before, and over such roads! "Don't ever have them straightened," she advised them. "You won't know what you've lost till it's done."

Jim Irwin came and, in his easy, pleasant way, set himself to help entertain Mary's friend. They had quite a merry dinner party.

"Really you're awfully cosy here," Ann said, settling into the rocker by the stove when they had moved from the table. "I somehow thought it would be different."

She understood now, too, something of why Mary had been so ready to leave the security of the city and come off here to the bush with Peter. Ann was shrewd, and she understood Peter very well for their short acquaintance. She understood Jim Irwin, too, and found him entertaining. Certainly she had never expected to meet anyone like Jim in the woods. There was a glamour about the whole thing. And Mary, even she had changed—grown, somehow. Her hands were roughened and hardened a little; Ann had noticed that immediately. And something—wind and sunburn perhaps—had done things to her skin; but her eyes and her smile were happy; she was positively radiant at times.

"But what are the winters like?" Ann wanted to know. "It gets terribly cold, I know."

"We don't mind them," Mary said. "A log house can be kept warm, if someone has time enough to go from one stove to another and keep them filled with wood." She did not add that on cold nights if Peter slept right through without getting up to stoke the fires, the water in the teakettle on the stove would be a solid ball of ice in the morning;

for it would be impossible to explain to Ann how quickly the house warmed up when a new fire was made.

"And you must be terribly shut in," Ann sympathized. "I should think the roads would be blocked for days after a snow storm like you have here. What would you do if you wanted a doctor?"

Yes. What would they do? Neither Peter nor Mary was ready with an answer to that.

"We go right over the snow," Jim Irwin explained. "Having nothing better, I use snow shoes; but you should see the variety of conveyances the good farmers like Peter have. One of them is a toboggan, a real toboggan, only you hitch it to a horse. The toboggan is guaranteed to ride over any snow, however deep, so long as the horse stays up. Horses aren't so dependable, though; they're not really meant for this country. We're thinking now of bringing in reindeer; we wouldn't have to go much farther north for them, you know.

"When the roads are open, of course we travel more formally. We have a French family here, who drive into town on holy days in a cariole which is nothing less than a house on wheels. There are almost enough of themselves to fill it, but they pick up another family or two on the way. They have a stove in it and whenever I've met them there's been a good smoke coming out of the pipe in the roof. You become very resourceful in a new country."

"And imaginative, I should judge."

"It's quite true about the French family and the toboggans," Mary assured her. "I hadn't heard about the reindeer but I'm learning to live with an open mind."

Jim had brought his violin, and because Ann played the piano so much better than she did herself, Mary asked her to accompany him. And as they played, Mary, sitting across the room on the couch, with her shoulder just touching Peter's, listened with a deep content. It was good to have Ann there. She was so bright and so altogether lovely to look at. Mary had always known Ann was pretty, but in town she had not seemed much different from other pretty girls. Here she was definitely different. She was some years older than Mary but her skin had the rose petal texture of a sixteen-year-old girl; the women Mary had been seeing did not make a ritual of facials and clay packs. Ann's hair went in waves as simply as if it had a natural curl—Mary remembered how particular Ann had always been about hair-dressers; remembered, too, that she, herself, had not had a wave put in her hair since she came here. Ann's hands moving over the key-board were smooth and white, with the nails polished and delicately tinted. Mary looked down at her own hands and felt her face burn. With gardens to tend and floors to clean and all the everyday things that a farm woman had to do around the house, it was easy to neglect keeping

up to the standards of a town beauty parlour; it just couldn't be done.

. . . . .

"You may remember, I wasn't very enthusiastic about your coming up here," Ann confided when Mary was leaving her in the guest room for the night. "But of course I hadn't met your Peter then, and I guess my imagination wasn't very active about a lot of things. I find it all easier to understand now."

But she did not find it all so easy to understand the next morning, when the cold light of day wiped out the glamour of lamp light and shadows on the rough log walls, and Jim Irwin was not there to flirt with. She followed Mary about at her work, wondering how she managed to get things done so well with so little equipment to work with. Ann could almost have wept at Mary's childish enthusiasm over their well and pump.

"Weren't we fortunate to find water so close to the house?" she said. "Tony Marotta is the 'water witch' or wizard of the neighbourhood and when he started over the ground with a forked willow branch, we almost held our breaths until, right here, the twig turned in his hands. Peter says there must be rock not far underground, for it's just like spring water."

Ann did not know what comment to make. It had never occurred to her to wonder where water

came from, and it was pathetic to find a woman grateful for having a well and a pump close to her door.

They went for a walk down the trail.

"We might see a deer," Mary said, "only you never do see them when you're looking for them. I didn't tell you about the one that came almost to our window one night. It was funny. I had had a letter that day from a girl in town, telling about some movies she'd been seeing, and when she finished she apologized for the possibility that she might be making me lonesome, 'for I know you don't have anything like that where you are,' she said. And that night—there was snow on the ground and clear moonlight—when Peter put out the light a deer came across the yard and stood right in front of the window for a while, then turned and went off, almost flying over the bushes. So we had our moving picture after all. We have often watched rabbits playing on the snow at night."

They met Marie Joliette cantering along on horseback, tossing her black hair out of her eyes. She stopped beside them and Mary introduced her. The French girl was shy with strangers, but not awkward, and very attractive. She was coming to borrow some coffee, she said, but since they were going for a walk she would come back in an hour or two. The door was not locked, Mary told her, and the coffee was in a can on the pantry shelf.

Would she mind going in and getting it for herself? The settlement was very informal in its borrowing habits.

"A very pretty girl, with a little attention," Ann remarked as Marie rode off.

Mary knew that Marie was pretty, but she had never noticed any lack of "attention." The Joliettes, in spite of their swarthinness, all had a sort of shining cleanness about them; but Ann's visit was too short to begin correcting her on such points.

As they walked on, Mary told about Alice Archer and about her own baby that would be coming in the New Year. Ann stopped in her tracks:

"Oh, no, Mary!" she said. "Not here!"

The shining in Mary's eyes faded a little. She had expected Ann to be pleased about it. "Why not?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sorry," Ann apologized. "You just surprised me so. But here, in the winter, with no doctor within thirty miles and possibly a snow storm just at the time! You tell Peter you're coming to the city to a hospital where they have specialists and every latest thing. Come early and I'll find a room for you near my place."

"No. I couldn't do that," Mary protested very decidedly. "There's a hospital at the Junction. I'm going there. We're going to have a hospital at Elkton after a while, but it won't be ready for a year yet."

"I'm going to talk to Peter," Ann began.

"No; don't," Mary begged her. "Peter's worried enough as it is. You see, Alice had a convulsion with no one but Peter and Ed there."

"I don't wonder he's worried," said Ann grimly, "but I shouldn't be talking like this. Of course you'll be all right, but you can't afford to take any chances. . . . Are these trees poplars or birch, Mary?"

She was doing her duty by changing the subject. There had been not a word, Mary noticed, about the wonder of having a child—her child and Peter's. Another Peter Shoedecker! She had often imagined Peter as he must have been at two and five, learning to talk, starting to school, already beginning to take life seriously, no doubt. And now to see another Peter Shoedecker growing up like his father, gentle and clean and strong, with a clear mind and useful hands working out his own problems, and carrying half the burden of the weaker folk about him! Let sculptors make their statues and artists paint their pictures—this other was creation! There were times when she felt that life had given her far more than her share of happiness and opportunity. She could not feel hurt that Ann, with her pathetically busy round of dressing and dancing and flirting and seeing the latest shows and reading the latest books and never once getting her teeth into life, could not understand.

Directly after noon Peter had to take Ann to the train again. Left alone, and a little tired after the excitement of the visit, one trivial worry after another

began to trouble Mary. Ann had been sorry for her—that rankled most of all. And it was not entirely because of the baby. She had said last night that she liked the house, but she had seemed restless in it this morning. She had thought that “with a little attention” Marie Joliette would be pretty. If she felt that about a girl in her blooming teen years, dear knows what she had seen amiss in Mary herself!

She looked in the mirror, and looked again, startled, as if she were seeing herself for the first time. She had been letting herself go! Her skin was rough and the wind had left a brown tan. The life seemed to have gone out of her hair—women on homesteads could not have permanent waves when their hair began to go limp and stringy. There were dark circles of fatigue under her eyes, for now that she had time to think of it, she was tired. And only this morning she had felt that she almost walked with the gods! “I suppose the worst of being Irish is that, like an umbrella, you’re either up or down most of the time,” she said to herself.

Peter was home early. He seemed a little worried, Mary thought, and after supper, when the chores were done and they had settled into their chairs before the fire, she knew that he had something he wanted to say to her.

He drew her chair closer, so he could rest his arm along the back of it as he liked to do. Then he got up, went to where his overcoat hung, took a

parcel from the pocket and brought it back to her.

"I almost forgot," he said. "Ann sent you this. I was thinking of something else and forgot all about it."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. She wanted to stop at the drug store and came out with this; said to tell you it wasn't just what she wanted but it was fairly good—something like that."

Mary opened it. It was a box of cosmetics—three squat little jars of creams, a green glass bottle of astringent and a separate bottle of hand lotion. It was ungrateful and self-conscious and mean to be hurt about it, she knew, but for some unaccountable reason—or more likely because she had looked in the mirror that afternoon—she was hurt, and ashamed of herself that she could feel so. She tried to say what she should say, so that Peter would not wonder at her, but her throat felt tight and her eyes were smarting.

"Ann thinks you should go to a hospital in the city," Peter was saying.

"Did she tell you that, too?" she snapped.

"She thinks it would be safer, that you should go down about a month before——"

"And wait around in someone's apartment or a rest home where they would think it a pity that a baby should be born to live in the backwoods up here! I tell you I can't stand the way they feel about it."

"But they have specialists in the hospital there."

"They have a good doctor at the Junction. Other women in the North don't go three hundred miles from home to have a baby. And where would we find the money to pay specialists?"

"We'll find the money for this, no matter what it takes. I stopped at the feed store and they'll take all we can spare of the seed potatoes—that you saved—and pay cash for them. Then just to make sure we have enough, I'm selling the white heifer to Dafoe, the dairyman south of Elkton; he's going into pure-breds." (Well she knew what it would cost Peter to part with the white heifer that he had counted on to build up his own herd.) "The very best hospital, Ann said——"

"I don't care what Ann said," she stormed at him. Then with the hateful little coolness that came when her temper was at its worst, she added, "Of course, if it would relieve you of a lot of trouble——"

Nothing that she could say would stir Peter into a retort, these times, but in spite of his understanding, the hurt of this went a bit too deep to hide entirely. She turned her face against his coat and cried,

"Oh, I didn't mean that, Peter. Don't you see it's just that I don't want to go off there alone? It seems, if you were just around somewhere, nothing very terrible could happen."

He had been thinking a lot about what could happen. He held her close and smoothed her hair with his roughened hands and said with an assurance

that quieted her, though his voice was not quite steady,

"We'll get you through."

Some time in the night she opened her eyes to find him still awake.

"Peter," she begged, "you're not staying awake thinking about what I said! You know I didn't mean that?"

"Bless you, no. I generally know what you mean better than you do yourself. Go to sleep."

He could not tell her of the nightmares haunting him—bad weather and snow-blocked roads and a score of other possible accidents. But as usual, in his farming and his living, he was making plans to get ahead of bad weather and to forestall accidents. The coming Shoedecker baby and its mother had almost more than an even chance with the mothers and babies who would be going through city hospitals that year.

## CHAPTER XIII

IT was an uncertain winter from the beginning—snow falling steadily for days at a time, then a spell of fine weather and another blow. Men at the saw mills said the snow was nine feet deep in the bush, and sometimes, when a road had to be broken after a storm, the farmers almost believed them.

Came a day in January when the Shoedeckers watched the sky anxiously, for it was plain that another storm was coming. Mary did not intend to go to the Junction for a week yet, but there was no telling how many days a storm would last, nor how long the roads might be blocked afterwards. Tony Marotta coming to borrow the saw and engine remarked:

"I t'inka dis be da worst yet. Da wind, she too soft."

Peter thought so, too.

"How long do you think it will be before it gets here?" he asked.

"Four, six hour', mebbby."

Peter came into the house and, trying to be casual about it, said:

"I'd feel a little safer if we were in town. How soon could you be ready to leave?"

"To-day?"

"Um-hum. In a couple of hours?"

"But the storm won't last a week."

"We want to be there in time."

"You wouldn't want to wait at the Junction for a week or more, and if we go to-day what about things here?"

"I'm going over to see Jack Ritchie about it now. Joe Olsen has a job at the mill, Tony says. Joe's better with stock, but Jack will manage all right. If I could see Hans I'd ask him to come over once in a while and keep an eye on things, but Jack will get along. We ought to start by two o'clock."

The clouds were thickening when they set out with the team and sleigh—they could not hope to get through with anything lighter if the snow had drifted in the valley past Joliettes' as it sometimes did. The trail through the woods was sheltered, but when they turned on to the main road, the snow was already beginning to blow. Mrs. Joliette saw them coming. She was too far from the road to call to them but she stood in her open door and waved them Godspeed with her hands and her apron. At the same time Andre and Mathieu came running around the house, carrying shovels. They climbed into the back of the sleigh, their dark faces red from the wind, their dark eyes twinkling as usual.

"Mother thought you might be wanting to catch the train," Andre explained. "No one's been

through yet to-day. Gets pretty bad in the valley sometimes."

Peter had brought his own shovel, of course. He had not expected help, but it was just like the Joliettes to think of a thing like that.

The snow had blown into the hollow more than they had anticipated. It took the three of them a good quarter of an hour to cut a way through.

"Guess she'll be all right from now on," said Andre, referring to the road. "Be bad to-night, though."

"I'm not coming back to-night," Peter said.

"No. Mother said not." The boys understood. They talked things over frankly in this French family.

Peter thanked them, and as they turned towards home, Andre touched his cap to Mary.

"Good-bye," he called cheerfully, and added naturally, with a smile of encouragement, "and good luck."

Mathieu gave his cap a tug too and, shouldering their shovels, they went back up the hill.

The Shoedeckers reached town half an hour before train time. Peter arranged with the thresher to keep his team while he was away, and at eight o'clock they got into the Junction.

They went to the little hotel where, shy and a little afraid of each other, they had had breakfast together nearly two years ago. There was something

rather lovely about coming back to the place where they were married, for the next great event in their family life. The storm had come on about sundown. Now it swirled and roared through the town, piling up against buildings and filling the streets; even the train would have difficulty going farther that night. They knew what it would be like on the back country roads now, but as they lingered over their supper, they could see through the frosting window and the snow-filled air, the lights of the hospital. They were safely in harbour. Peter was filled with a great thankfulness and a little modest pride that he had managed well. A farmer, if he were wise, learned to read the signs of the weather, and to take no chances when anything serious was at stake.

In the morning they called at the hospital.

"A week yet," Mary repeated, as they came away. "You won't want to stay here all that time?"

"Sure I'm staying," said Peter. He had not forgotten—he was sure he would never forget—that she had said, "It seems that nothing very terrible could happen if you were just around somewhere."

But he was concerned about things at the farm, too. Towards the end of the week the storm quieted, and he judged that the road from Poplar Hill to Elkton would be broken and that Hans Olsen would be in town on Saturday. He sent a message to one of the stores to have Hans telephone him, and he smiled to himself afterwards, thinking of the

amusement of anyone within hearing, as the Dane's great voice boomed through the store:

"Iss t'at you, Pete? . . . The wife iss all right? . . . Sure, ya; safer be in time. Mis' Archer t'row a scare into effrybody. . . . Sure, ya . . . Yack, he iss doing all right. . . . I bane t'ere las' night an' Pierre Yoliette, he bane t'ere t'iss morning. . . . The red heifer iss coming in soon, eh? . . . Ya, sure; we keep eye on her. We see to t'ings."

"Everything's fine at home," Peter reported to Mary. "We sure have good neighbours." He was relieved to know that men of experience like Hans and Pierre would "keep an eye on" the red heifer.

The baby was born the next week, and all was well. They named him John after his grandfather.

When his son was a day old, Peter went back to the farm. Three weeks later he came to the Junction and took his family home. He was inordinately proud of John—a fair, blue-eyed replica of himself, incredibly small and helpless, it seemed, though the nurses said he was the strongest baby they had had in the hospital in years.

And Peter took his family responsibilities seriously, even for a Shoedecker. He borrowed Joliettes' cariole to bring them out from town—it was a cold day and the snow was deep and travel slow, but

with a fire burning in the little stove, the seats taken out and the sitting room couch put in for Mary, and the clothes basket she had fixed up for the baby, it made a very comfortable ambulance. They brought Mrs. Evans, a practical nurse from town, to stay for a few days until they should get into the way of taking care of the baby themselves.

Everything was fine. No one was any the worse for the sixteen mile drive with the temperature at thirty below zero. John seemed to like his new surroundings and to be anxious to give no unnecessary trouble. He wakened only when it was time to be fed and took the ordeal of bathing and dressing with what patience he could. . . . This was the first day. In the middle of the night another patient sent for the nurse and she had to leave them.

"You won't have any trouble," she assured Mary.

"Of course not," said Mary, and lay awake the rest of the night worrying about it.

After breakfast she spread a blanket on the kitchen table, hung a fresh supply of little clothes by the oven door to warm, and assembled the things for the baby's bath. Peter had built up the fire to make sure of having the room warm enough, and he stood around, waiting to be of use if he was needed. He had watched the nurse giving John his bath the day before, and he felt that he knew something

about it. Mary cooled the water to just the right temperature, testing it with her elbow. She laid John on the table and got him undressed. Peter noticed that she was still very white. Then he saw that she was very white indeed. He was just in time to catch her before she fell. He tipped her head down until she came to, and laid her on the couch.

"Such a time to faint!" she gasped. "The baby, Peter; wrap him up. I'll be all right in a minute."

He spread a blanket over the baby, then said:

"What do you say if I try my hand at this?"

He was taking no chance on her fainting again.

"Oh, you couldn't. I'm almost afraid to try it myself."

"That's because you're not strong yet, and you're all in a dither over it."

"But you wouldn't know how."

"I watched Mrs. Evans yesterday."

He almost added that he was rather skilful at taking care of other young animals and that the principle was pretty much the same, but he thought better of it. John wouldn't mind, of course, but the idea might not go over so well with a three-weeks-old mother.

Already he was going ahead with it, and the baby did not seem to mind it more than usual. He even settled into a quiet content as the steady hands held him. It was the same with the new lambs

and all the other young animals around the place, Mary reflected. She closed her eyes and ceased to worry until she heard Peter saying, either to himself or to John,

"Now how do you suppose this goes?" She went to get up then to help him.

"Stay where you are," he told her. "I never saw a harness I couldn't put together yet."

So she let him go on with it. After he had borne the burden and heat of the day it would be a shame to take the final triumph out of his hands. When he brought the baby to her, fully dressed, she saw that except for a few minor details, the job had been well done.

Then Peter took his blue handkerchief and wiped his face.

"Whew, it's hot in here!" he said. "I don't mind telling you, that's the hardest piece of work I've done in years. I don't wonder it scared you. But it isn't so bad when we both know a little about it. You'd think there'd be some books we could read up on babies. The next thing we know, he'll be getting teeth and he'll be needing lime and the things you get in green feed. Now with a calf——" He stopped; he had probably put his foot in it, there. But Mary laughed. She was thinking that Peter's knowledge of the scientific care of animals was going to be rather helpful with his family.

"Maybe when you get the hospital built, the

doctor there will be able to tell us just what 'green feeds' would be best for him," she said.

Peter had already been thinking something like this himself. When you had a family it was doubly important to have a doctor within reach, not just two days a week but all the time.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE logs to build the hospital must be taken out of the woods while the snow was on the ground. With the long haul to town it meant days of work which the homesteaders could not well spare from their own clearing, but they gave their time generously and cheerfully. They gave the logs, too, but they did not consider them a gift; the trees had to be cut anyway and there were lots more of them left. And while the new settlers were supplying the lumber for the hospital, the farmers nearer town and the townspeople were providing money for other requirements of the building. The hospital would be opened in the summer; it was a long step forward in community progress.

Peter was interested in the community, but in spite of his resolution to do more for it, he found it hard, this winter, to tear his interests from his own house and the mite of humanity that was his son. It was a proud day for him when he saw recognition and a welcome dawning in the baby's eyes when he came into the house. He never quite forgot the fact that John depended on him. When he awakened, and cried in the night, and Peter came to take him to his mother, he was quiet as soon

as the strong hands lifted him. And a little later, when his father talked to him, he would listen with a look of unblinking interest in his grey blue eyes. He had few upsets or troubles of any sort; Mary was bringing him up by a book and it worked. Peter read the book, too, even read bits of it out loud to John sometimes, and asked his opinion of it. If John had understood his father's language he would have known just why the natural routine of his days was interrupted by cod liver oil and orange juice, and when to be prepared for egg yolk and spinach. But he had no worries about the future; he was content to let the days take care of themselves.

They had long, quiet evenings in their own house this winter. Mary would not disturb John's programme to take him into houses that might be too cold or too hot, or where someone might have a cold. Jim Irwin came occasionally in the evening to visit them; sometimes he brought his violin and sometimes he left a book that had been sent from the Old Country. Mary revelled in these. Peter was not interested in some of them; in fact, he said frankly that he could make no headway with them at all. A modern novel with married people mixed up in triangle love affairs, was to him so unnatural as to be not quite "healthy." And no literary style could make up for indecency—of which he thought there was plenty in some of these books. He liked Curwood's stories and

Jack London, and in "Bambi," a translated biography of a deer, he first awakened to the beauty of words. It was a great hour for Mary when Peter began to read out a sentence or a phrase to her, which, he said, "made you see the thing just as it was." She could see prospects of some glorious excursions into books, added to all the other good times they had together.

He liked to read about Russia, not that he thought they had the right idea altogether, he said, but they were struggling towards relief for the common people. Peter had come from a line of ancestors whose creed had been a very liberal belief in the goodness of God and the brotherhood of man, and whose religion was pretty much a righting of social injustice. He had a keen mind for economics and spent some interesting hours reviewing the problems of the world with Jim, who also had socialistic leanings but was too easy-going to be very much in earnest about them. He, Peter, devoured Abraham Lincoln with the astonished zest of a man who had not known there were such things to be partaken of, and he discussed with Jim what a man like Lincoln would do in certain international issues to-day.

"You should go into politics yourself," Jim laughed. Peter laughed, too.

While Peter was having such a fine time enjoying his evenings at home, Jane Meadows sent a message asking him to call the next time he was going to

town and to bring Jim Irwin with him; she knew that Mary would not care to take such a long drive with the baby in cold weather. She wanted to see them about something concerning Poplar Hill.

Much as he liked Jane and respected her good sense, Peter had misgivings. If she wanted him to get out and stir up some community doings this winter, she had chosen a bad time. Mary and the baby couldn't go out nights, and things were so comfortable at home. Jane should know that married people with young children could not be counted on to do much for the community.

But that was just what she wanted.

"Oh, I'm not going to ask you to get out and chaperon a dance in the school," she assured him, when he warned her that he was afraid she couldn't expect much of Mary and him until John was older. "I don't hold much with such public parties, anyway; the young folks would be better dancing in their own kitchens—most of the houses are big enough for a party. It's more than that."

She brought out some correspondence that had come to her as an old settler, a "key woman" in the district. It seemed the railway company was organizing a competition in community building. They were giving credit, not for a great variety of "projects," but for making the community a better place for people to live. Neither she nor Peter cared much for competition in anything, but they supposed it was one way of getting a lot of

people interested. It was not likely that Elkton or Poplar Hill or any of the other homesteading settlements would be among the winners in a province wide competition, but that was no reason why they should not try some community improvement for its own sake.

"In a place as new as Poplar Hill, there are only a few things we can do," Peter said, "but I'll admit we should be doing more than we are. I made some high resolves last fall, but I'm afraid my interests have been side-tracked considerably since then."

"About the church, you mean," said Jane. "I remember you felt that you needed a church, but could your people manage another building so soon, after doing so much for the hospital?"

"I don't believe a church building is what we need most. We have the school. Any money we could raise might better go to support an extra missionary in the district, so that our settlement and others farther back could have a service oftener than once a month. There aren't very many of us out at the Hill and Joliettes and Marottas are Catholics. They'd probably help to put up the building, but they couldn't attend a Protestant church. Joliettes go to church in Elkton pretty regularly, but it's a long trip in bad weather, and there are other Catholic families farther back who can't go to town. If we'd all get together and fix up the school to make it warmer—we've got to do that anyway—and build

a shed for horses, I don't see why the Catholics couldn't have service there, as well as the rest of us, when a priest could come. We have a few Lutherans, too. They'd come to our church, but they want their children confirmed in their own faith; they could have the Lutheran minister come out from town sometimes and have classes for their children. I've read that they do something like that in a new railway town in Ontario. They have a hall, and the Catholics have a church service in it on Sunday morning, the Anglicans at night, and the rest in the afternoon."

Jane seemed to be still listening after he had stopped speaking. "And it works?" she asked.

"Works fine, they say."

"It's strange we never thought of that before," she said slowly. "The younger people see farther to-day than we did in our time."

"So far as I can see, it's still very much your time," he smiled. "You seem to be the one to get anything started. Of course that little scheme about the churches wouldn't count for much in a competition—not that that matters. What would the railway like us to do?"

"The circular mentions something about 'adult education.'"

"What about a library?"

"You should have a library. I'd say that was one of the first things to try for. But can you count on all your people reading, or reading anything that you

could call 'educational,' if you just put in a library and let it go at that? And you should get them together—that's part of the idea; 'fostering social life in a right atmosphere,' the letter says."

"I dare say we need that all right, but I don't see anyone getting our folks interested in a debating league or anything like that."

"No, but you might interest them in music. That's where I thought Jim could help. Mrs. Olsen told me about the singing at the Christmas tree a year ago. She said she hadn't heard Hans sing for years before. Andre Joliette spoke of it, too. He said even the boys would as soon sing to Jim's singing as dance to his fiddle."

Evidently neither Mrs. Olsen nor Andre had told Jane anything about later events of the Christmas tree party, but for all her diplomacy, both Peter and Jim were sure that she knew. Nettie Culliver would see to that.

There would be many difficulties in the way of organizing a singing class, and Jim said that to qualify at all as a piece of adult education, it should be a singing class, not just a coming together to sing. There would be the matter of putting on fires to heat the school, one night a week. Would the older people feel like coming out on a very cold or stormy night? And, what about the children? Shouldn't they have a chance to learn to sing, too? They decided that the best arrangements would be to have a singing lesson at the school every Friday

afternoon for both the children and the older people.

As they talked over their plans, and how to present them to the Poplar Hill folk, Jane reminded them that they would need a secretary, and that Mary would be the one for that.

"You can see to that, Jim, when you have the meeting," she said. "It won't be necessary for her to go to every class, but she'll know how to put things in a report so the railway people will get a right picture of what you're doing. While she's about it, she might send something to the papers sometimes."

This last thought was an inspiration. When the singing class and the library and the church services got under way, as they did before the winter was over, Mary found that she had something very well worth sending to the papers. She knew the interest a city reader would find in the story of how the settlers in the backwoods got together to fit their school for a "meeting-house," and how on Sundays a Catholic priest sometimes came and celebrated mass at nine o'clock in the morning, and the same fire kindled for this service warmed the building for the Protestant missionary and his flock at eleven. Or the picture of the same log school on a Friday afternoon when men and women came bringing babies and small children with them; and young men from homesteads farther back filed self-consciously into the back benches, sometimes casting

covert glances in the direction of the few older girls present, but soon forgetting even this in the spell of the singing master's teaching. She sent one story, then the other, to *The Clarion* and the editor wrote for more. She did a personality sketch of Mrs. Joliette and her neighbourly ministrations, that was a masterpiece. Sometimes as she laboured to make her stories true—not as an outsider would see these people, but as she knew them—she felt that she was treading on almost holy ground.

She felt something of this too, on a Friday afternoon when Peter kept John at home and she went to the singing class. There was no effort at forcing an understanding of different music. Simple tunes they sang—"Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes," "All Through The Night," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"—and Jim Irwin, with his background of travel and study, gave them the setting for these songs and the folk songs of other lands. Jane Meadows was there and they asked her to "say a few words."

"I was just thinking of something I read in a book of David Grayson's," she said. "Speaking of the people he lived among he said, 'We had been the best of neighbours in the way of butter-tubs, whiffle-trees and pig-killings, but we had never once looked up together at the sky.' Poplar Hill has always been known as a place where the people are good neighbours, and I think this afternoon Jim has had us 'looking up together at the sky.'"

Of course Mary sent this to the paper, too, and remembered meetings she had attended in her newspaper days where no one seemed to say anything that would "make copy."

. . . . .

It seemed that the work of building on the homestead would never be done. This winter it was an ice-house. Three more heifers would be cows in the spring; that meant still more cream to sell, and any cream that went from a Shoedecker farm must go sweet and cold and well cared for. They would need ice through the summer, so before the ground was frozen in the fall, Peter laid the foundation for an ice-house and a milk room. On mild days in winter he finished the building, insulated it with saw-dust from the mill, and put up a store of ice from the pond on his own place.

And there was scarcely a day when his axe could not be heard in the woods. Other work like building had to be done, but all the time an impatience to be at the business of making land possessed him—the "clearing fever," he called it. Now that he could hire a tractor to cut the brush and operate the breaking-plough, after he had taken out the trees, clearing was not so tedious. The four acres a year required by the Land Office was not difficult; this year he would manage about ten. That would be twenty-five acres of his own ground ready for crop. He was fast making a farm.

As summer came, the whole farmstead took on a more habitable appearance. There was a grass plot about the house now, so firm and smooth that John could roll on it while his mother hung the washing on the line. She had scarlet runners blossoming on the clothes-line posts and a patch of Rosy Morn petunias blooming near the pump. The plants in her perennial border were spreading to fill the empty spaces, and the kitchen garden at the back was more thrifty than ever. She was very busy and very happy, growing into a sturdiness of body and a new serenity of spirit; life was very natural here, and for the Shoedeckers very complete.

Fall came and they had more grain to thresh, more seed potatoes to sell than they had the year before. Peter did not go threshing; he had as much work as he could well take care of on his own place. He had some lumber planed especially for the purpose, and in the evenings and on rainy days he "boarded" the inside of the house. It would be warmer than with the bare log walls, and Mary could have it papered or painted in any colours she liked. Oh, they could afford occasional luxuries now! Peter's personal extravagances ran to a few rather expensive magazines of which Jim Irwin had told him. There was not much satisfaction in taking a daily paper when the mail came to the settlement only three times a week, and these particular magazines seemed to give a better account of world affairs. Of course "world affairs" did not

seem to affect them much, shut off as they were in the woods, but he knew that nothing could happen anywhere in the world, but its effects would reach Poplar Hill sooner or later. And of course there were serious troubles not far from home. Here in the North, with free land and good weather, he had little worry about making a living; but he was especially concerned for the farmers still in the drought-ridden parts of his own province, and for the men out of work in the towns he knew.

One night in September, when the lengthening evenings gave some time for reading again, he closed his book, took a piece of paper and his carpenter's rule and began to draw. Mary asked what he was doing.

"I've been thinking, John will want to be down on the floor a lot this winter and the floors are cold. I'm trying to figure out how I can heat the house from underneath," he said.

"You're not thinking of a furnace!" she gasped.

"No, but it amounts to the same thing—putting a box stove in the cellar, walling it in with cement or stones and plaster, and running hot air pipes to registers in the floor. We'd still need stoves but this would give us a steady heat all over the house."

Before the very cold weather came he got a stove, second-hand, for a few dollars, and the scheme worked so well that not one of Mary's geraniums was frozen, even when she forgot to take them

from the windows at night; and John played comfortably on the floor all through the winter.

. . . . .

Early in December, a heavy snow fell. The roads had scarcely been opened after the first big storm until they were filled again. As one fall came after another, sleighs packed a solid track three or four feet above the road bed, and drivers meeting with their teams must manoeuvre cautiously to pass—if a horse went down in the deep snow it might be some trouble to get him up again. Trips to town over such roads were tedious and worrisome. The neighbours took turns in going and doing shopping and other errands for each other. When a man was later than usual in getting home, his wife thought of a dozen possible accidents.

It was already dark on one of Peter's days away, when Bane Olsen drove into the Shoedeckers' yard, and came to the house on the run.

"My mother!" he said. He had been crying and speech was difficult—he was only fourteen. "She's sick and she wants you to come. Mrs. Joliette has the 'flu. Dad couldn't leave her, and Joe's away, so I came."

So Mrs. Olsen had not gone to the hospital in time. Mary had never thought of a call like this coming to herself; everyone had depended on Mrs. Joliette. But already she was getting ready to go—damping the fire, leaving a note for Peter, getting

into her coat and overshoes, wrapping John first in his outdoor clothes, then in a blanket. She had never taken him away from home at such an hour before, but that was neither here nor there when a neighbour needed help.

Out on the road, Bane urged the horses to a trot, but it was heavy going and after a stumble or two in the loose snow at the edge of the track, they crowded together when he tried to hurry them. He was almost beside himself. He had heard a cry from his mother's room as he came away and he was hearing it still. His father had told him to hurry. And he knew how Mrs. Archer had died. He drove standing up in the front of the sleigh-box; his voice broke sometimes when he spoke to the horses, and sometimes Mary heard him catch his breath in a gulp.

"It won't take us much longer," she encouraged him when they had still almost a mile to go.

And then the horses stopped.

"There's something on the road," Bane said, climbing out to investigate. In the dark Mary could not tell what it was, but it looked like a load of wood. And Bane came back, angry and frightened and openly crying now.

"It's Jack Ritchie's sleigh," he sobbed. "It's right in the middle of the road, and he's taken the horses and gone home."

"Is there no way we can get around it?" Mary asked, and then she understood. The road had been

made just last summer and they were on a spot that had been built up with stones; to drive a horse on either side meant to bury him in the snow.

"Now why would Jack do a thing like this?" she asked impatiently, trying to think of a way out of the trouble.

"One of his horses must have stumbled and cut itself with its shoe," Bane explained. "There's blood on the snow."

Jack had no doubt gone for another horse and would be back later to move his sleigh, but it would not be for a few hours at the best he could do. They could not wait there; it would take them a long time to wade through the deep snow and carry John, and Mrs. Olsen was needing them—perhaps she was needing them badly. Mary laid John on the straw in the bottom of the sleigh and covered him well with a blanket. Then she, too, climbed out and went to look things over. It was not a very big load of wood and the sticks were not heavy for cordwood.

"We'll have to unload it," she said. "Do you know how to take the sleighs apart? I don't think we could lift both bobs at once."

Bane said he knew. Now that there was a hope of getting through, he felt strong enough to lift the whole sleigh himself.

So they climbed on the load of wood, and for the next fifteen minutes they worked as fast as they could, tumbling the sticks off on the side of the

road. Then they turned and pulled at the rack until they had it dragged from the sleigh.

"I'm glad they don't make racks of anything heavier than poplar up here," said Mary, resting for a minute to get her breath.

John cried a little, not from fear or cold as his mother knew by the sound he made, but just as a protest at the general interference with his routine of life. She called back to him, but she did not leave what she was doing to go to him. It was as well to learn early to adapt oneself to the demands of pioneer life.

The bolt that held the sleighs together came out without much trouble. Bane put it where it would not get lost in the snow, then, heaving together, they toppled the bobs, one at a time, clear of the road.

They were hot and winded as they climbed into the sleigh again. The horses, glad to be moving, made better time now.

"It'll make a lot of work for Jack," Bane remarked, as they drove off, "but I'll come and help him to-morrow—if everything's all right," he added soberly. His worries were not yet over.

The baby was born when they arrived, but Mary was in time to wash and dress it. That, Hans said, he could not have managed to do.

"I bane sorry making such trouble," Mrs. Olsen apologized. "I meant sure to go to the hospital, now we haf' it, but I t'ought anot'er week."

She was white and spent but not seriously ill. She came of sturdy stock and had borne other children without benefit of doctors. They were all going to be so pleased about this little girl, she said, and she was clearly a little proud of herself.

"But, Mis' Shoetecker, you mustn't t'ink I t'ink I smart for not go to the hospital," she went on. "I'm a little 'shamed. I tell ot'er young women 'go' an' I don't go myself. But to-morrow Hans iss bringing the doctor out, yust to be safe an' to show we haf' some sense." She tried to smile but she was very tired.

"Maybe I shouldn't send for you," she added after a while—"wit' your baby an' all, but now you're here, Hans will go for Mis' Ritchie to come an' stay. I might haf' sent Bane for her, but I wass so bad, Mis' Shoetecker, an' I t'ought of you first."

Mary felt a catch in her throat and a singing in her heart. Her neighbour had thought of her first, had known she could count on her in her trouble. This was the sort of tribute one learned to appreciate, living in a new country.

A few hours later Peter came, and with Mrs. Ritchie in charge of things, they left for home.

"Someone seems to have had an awful smash-up down the road," Peter remarked as they drove along. "I can't make it out at all—wood thrown all around and the rack on top of it, and the sleighs uncoupled and upset on the other side of the track."

"We did that," Mary told him innocently, "Bane and I. Something had happened to one of Jack Ritchie's horses, so he left his load there and we couldn't get around it."

"Was it your idea?"

"Certainly. We couldn't be waiting around there with Mrs. Olsen sick a mile away."

He looked at her, blinked and looked again.

"Well," he said. "For a girl who never saw the woods till she came here, you're coming on. You'll be another Mrs. Joliette before you're fifty."

"And I don't ask for higher praise than that," she told him.

When Nettie Culliver heard of the new Olsen baby—and nothing ever happened in the district that she did not hear of—she said, "And that's about all the use a hospital will ever be up here. These foreign women won't go to it anyway."

But the hospital was kept fairly busy. And the doctor, for all his post graduate diplomas from Vienna, had the concern for the people of his parish that good country doctors have always had. When Hans Olsen called at the hospital, and rather hesitantly asked if it would be too much to ask him to come out to see his wife—or did he think it needful—the doctor said he thought it very needful and would be ready to leave in an hour.

This was state medicine. The doctor received a salary from the government and his patients paid neither fees nor mileage, just a certain rate for

medical care in their yearly taxes. And so, the men and women who were opening up the country and establishing their homes and families there, were spared the suffering and danger and worry of being out of reach of a doctor, were spared also the burden of doctors' bills which would take the few spare dollars that the family sorely needed for other things.

## CHAPTER XV

**P**REPARATIONS for Christmas were under way on the Dafoe dairy farm near Elkton. The Dafoes had the best farm in the district and could afford a sumptuous celebration. Twice Emil Krupp, the hired man, had been sent to the woods for Christmas trees. The first he brought had been too small, so Mrs. Dafoe said, and she was so tired with her plans that she said it impatiently as though he had been careless. Then there were wreaths to be made to frame the windows, and spruce boughs are prickly to the hands, so Emil had done what had to be done with these, tacking them to lath frames with hands that were deft for all they were so big and red and cracked with the cold. His mother in the Old Land used to melt tallow to heal his chapped hands when winter came on.

Once Emil had to go into the parlour to fasten a rope of evergreens over an archway, and he had been overwhelmed with the elegance he saw there. Mrs. Dafoe told him to take off his boots before he went in, and it was well that he did, for they would surely have damaged the soft velvet of the rugs. But he almost died of shame, for there were holes in his socks; he had been busy with the wreaths

for so many evenings that his mending had been neglected. Besides, though the rest of the house was warm, the room up the back stairs where he slept was cold on winter nights and it would take a brave soul to sit and sew in such an atmosphere.

The Dafoes made much of Christmas. They bought expensive presents for each other and for the family, and for days after Christmas these gifts were kept on display, and neighbours were invited in "to see what the children got." They even showed them once to the children from the tenant farm down the road, where presents of any sort had been impossible that year. And there was the time when Mr. Dafoe had undertaken to buy, by himself, the tea set his wife wanted, and had chosen the wrong pattern. She told him it had "just spoiled her Christmas," and of course the day wasn't very happy for him, either. The whole family connection, except a sister who had been virtually disowned when she married into another religious denomination, always came to the Dafoes' for Christmas dinner, because, as Mrs. Dafoe said, it was the only house in the family big enough to accommodate everyone. She was known as a good entertainer, and for weeks in advance of the day, she mixed and baked and stewed and had her kitchen filled with the smell of mincemeat and cranberries and fruit cake and sage dressing. And housekeeping aunts, weary of their own cooking, and uncles accustomed to good feeding, anticipated the feast they would

have; and young cousins looked forward to the dance that would follow on Christmas night.

Emil, the hired man, was young too, not yet thirty, but he did not look forward to Christmas. He had not looked forward to anything for some time back. Four years he had been in the country, and he was still as lonely at times as he had been when he walked down the gang plank into the immigration sheds, a great, awkward, blond, young "foreigner," carrying all his possessions in a suitcase, and with never a word of English to help him. He had come to the new country with hope in his heart. He had heard that Canada was a land where all men were equal, but in the immigration sheds he, with other newcomers, had been herded about like so many cattle. The men who did not understand his language did not understand him, either. They did not know that, like most young men driven by poverty to a strange country, he had a childlike craving for kindness, that his apparent stolidity was really a painful shyness. They did not appreciate, or those in authority over them did not appreciate, the passion for the land that brought big, gentle, ox-like men like this to a country with acres of land to be claimed; so they sent them, not to farms, but to mines and railroads and construction camps.

When times went bad, Emil, like scores of others, lost his job. It had never been much, but it had meant food and shelter of a kind and something

to send home to his mother in Germany where things were even worse. He had planned to bring her to Canada as soon as he could save money for her passage. . . . There was a letter saying she was ill—he suspected that she was hungry and almost went mad over it. Then word came that she had died. He was alone, without work, brooding, cold, hungry, sick in body and mind and wanting to die. He had tried to die . . . and he had paid the penalty the law demanded.

That was three years ago, but he still had a shamed look that was something more than shyness now. There was no work for him in the city, but he had expected that. If only he could find a place on a farm where he could be with animals who were understanding and paid you back in kind for the treatment you gave them! But farmers in the South could not afford men in these dry years. There were homesteads, bush farms in the North, he learned. Of course, people told him, a man could not start on a homestead without horses or implements, but he might find work in the saw-mills or on some of the older farms near the railroad. With this hope he had come North, riding on freight cars with other homeless men by night, and tramping alone by day; and he had found work at the Dafoe dairy. Better still, he had already staked a claim on a homestead. He would save every possible cent of his wages through the winter, and in the spring he would go out to land of his own. Homesteads

were being taken up fast these times, they told him at the Land Office, but there was a place not very far back with some buildings already on it. It had been abandoned four times; for some reason no one seemed to be able to make a go of it. The neighbours called it "The Travellers' Rest," and there were such rumours about it now that anyone coming in was afraid of it; but the land was all right. Emil looked the map over, thought of the barn and shack already built and of the meagre savings he would have from his winter's work, and said he would take it.

Two days before Christmas Nettie Culliver came to see Mrs. Dafoe. Nettie seemed to make a business of going visiting around Christmas time. She looked at Emil as she passed him watering the cattle in the yard, and she looked at him again as she went away, but she did not speak. That night Mr. Dafoe told Emil he would not need him any longer. He paid him his wages and suggested that there was a hotel in Elkton. He would like him to leave at once. And Emil understood, and asked no questions.

He went to the cold, little room up the back stairs to get his belongings. It wasn't much of a room but it was the best he had known for some time. Now that he must leave it, it seemed something of a refuge. He had, of course, never felt that he really "belonged" at the Dafoes', but there were the fields, and the horses that never failed to

nicker when he opened the barn door, and the cattle—at least he had been understood there.

He put on his best suit, a once vivid navy blue, now rather faded and crumpled. The rest of his possessions, his working clothes, some letters, a mouth organ that he sometimes played when he went for the cows, a few trinkets that his mother had sent him the Christmas before she died, and an axe that he had bought the day he filed his claim on a homestead. The axe would be so much more to carry, but what could a man do on a bush homestead without an axe? And it was to his homestead he was going.

Mrs. Dafoe was not in the kitchen to say good-bye—of course not; but when he looked back from the road he saw her setting a candle in the window as she always did around Christmas time. It was a red candle and went well with the wreath suspended above it. He smiled in spite of his misery. Unlearned though he was, he knew the tradition of the Christmas candle; its light was to guide strayed or homeless souls to shelter.

He did not go to the hotel—he must make the money in his pocket last as long as he could. He knew the country about, and after dark he crawled into the shelter of a straw stack for the night. He was on his way again before daylight—not that he was in a hurry to arrive at his place. He could not spend the night in an empty shack with no fire; he must find a barn somewhere or a stable—the

warmth of the cattle would keep him from freezing. When he was out of the district where he was known he might call at farms to ask for work, but he had little hope of finding any.

He passed one farmhouse after another, and though a sensation at the pit of his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten for a day and a night, he did not stop to ask for food. If there had been some poor little house along the way, he might have had courage to go in, but most of them were prosperous, forbidding-looking houses. Some of them had wreaths in their windows, and these he would have avoided most of all.

Early in the afternoon it began to snow. By three o'clock the storm was almost a blizzard and it grew so dark that lamps were lighted in the few houses he passed, for he was in the bush now, where settlers lived farther apart. The drifted road made heavy walking, and strong though he was, he shifted his bag from one shoulder to the other and occasionally he stumbled. Recurring waves of nausea began to trouble him. If only he had something to eat, perhaps he could go on and find another straw stack for the night. It would be colder; perhaps in his exhaustion he could go to sleep, and if it got cold enough he might not have to struggle up again.

Still he pressed on towards his own place. He had studied the map of the township so thoroughly since he made his claim that he was as sure of the

road as if he had been over it before. He could not have more than three miles to go now, and there must be a house here somewhere. Whatever they might think of him, he would have to go in and ask for food. Then suddenly the woods opened into a clearing, and the light of the Shoedeckers' house shone out through the storm. The lamp was set close to the window as if it might be there to guide someone. At the gate he stopped for a second—it was going to be even harder than he had thought, but he turned in and knocked at the door. Immediately a woman opened it. She had a man's coat over her dress and a cap pulled down on her head.

"I wonder, Missis, could you gif me somet'ing to eat, yet?" he asked, a dull red mounting to the roots of his yellow hair.

The woman looked at him and her eyes were wise and kind. As a newspaper reporter she had sometimes lost a good story for her paper because she knew how to be sorry for people.

"Of course," she said, and held the door wide.

He stepped inside, pulled off his cap and looked ruefully at the snow his feet had tracked on to her clean floor. There was snow on his bag, too, so he turned to leave it outside.

"Don't put it out in the snow," she protested, and handed him a broom.

He brushed his feet and the bag, and carefully swept the snow outside. He knew that she was

watching him, but strangely, he did not feel embarrassed under her scrutiny. She pushed the kettle to the front of the stove and began taking off her coat.

"Shust anyt'ing," he told her. "I don't ask you should cook me a meal—and you were going out."

"Only to the barn," she explained, bustling about. "My husband sprained his ankle—slipped off a rolling log—and I've been trying to help him. He shouldn't be going about at all, but we have quite a lot of stock, and I'm not as much use at such work as I might be if I knew more about it."

She was frying eggs, making coffee, spreading a little cloth over the end of the table, bringing out home-made bread and preserves and fruit cake, as she might do if one of her own family had come home hungry. It was unbelievable. Emil wanted to cry but something inside him was singing. Whatever might come to him now, he would always have had the kindness of this.

"Your man hurted his foot?" he repeated. "I could help him. I know about stock."

"But you're going somewhere—maybe trying to get home for Christmas? And the roads are getting worse every hour. You'll want to be on your way."

"I vas going nov'ere," he told her dully. Did she want to get rid of him, too, he wondered.

"Then maybe you'd stay the night? If you'd care to do that, it would help us, for Peter shouldn't be at the barn at all."

A pride that he hadn't known in years came to life in Emil. He had been asked to spend the night with this family, and in such a way as to make him feel that he would be conferring a favour instead of receiving one. He knew animals and loved them. Here was something he could do better than most men. The farmer should have no complaint to make of his work.

Mary set his meal on the table and mercifully left him alone while she went to explain to Peter. It was not lost on Emil that he had been trusted with whatever valuables might be in the house. Presently she returned with John wrapped up like an Eskimo, snowy and glowing. John eyed the stranger gravely while his mother unwrapped him. Then he came nearer for a closer scrutiny, and finally, satisfied, came and put his hand on the stranger's knee.

Peter would be very glad of his help, Mary said, and if he would like to change his clothes, she would give him a pair of overalls. Respect even for his best clothes, she had, he noticed; but he fished his own overalls out of the grain bag and started for the barn with the eagerness of a man with a mission.

Not for years had Emil known a Christmas eve like this. When they came in for supper his weariness had left him, and he was ready to eat again.

"We've found a real herdsman, Mary," Peter announced. "He's taking over 'The Travellers'

Rest' and he's going to look after things here for few days till I can put my foot on the ground again." And then he added to Emil,

"I don't see why Dafoe ever let you go when he can afford to keep a man the year round. But his loss'll be my gain, if you'd like to change work sometimes for the use of my team, till you get one of your own."

"Dat vould shust set me going," Emil told him eagerly. His fortunes seemed to be turning fast, but there was still one shadow haunting him. Already this man was wondering why Dafoe had let him go. Sooner or later they would find out. Someone would be sure to tell, as Mrs. Culliver had told Mrs. Dafoe; then they, too, would think of him as a wolf in sheep's clothing, an impostor who had come into their house under false pretences. Always, it seemed, that old slip would be there to torture his memories and blacken his future.

After supper, with the dishes washed and John in bed for the night, Mary began putting things in baskets—food and toys and clothes which Emil supposed she had made for the children where they were going. Peter, with his crippled foot propped up on a chair, watched her.

"I hate to see you drive over these roads to-night. I suppose you feel you have to go?" he worried.

"Oh, yes, I must go," she said. "It's a neighbour's family," she explained to Emil. "Mrs. Ritchie's daughter and her husband and children have come

up from the city for the winter. He's been out of work and they're badly in need of things. Mrs. Ritchie has a hard time, too; so we're trying to help them over Christmas a little."

"I could drive you," Emil offered. "Might maybe need to shofel some."

"But it makes a long day for you." She had not forgotten that he had been tramping through the snow all day.

At the Ritchies' they welcomed Emil as the new neighbour he was; it had been lonesome passing the place since the Archers went, Mrs. Ritchie said. He almost forgot his shyness, sitting beside the woodbox, talking to Jack, until Mary was ready to go.

The storm was over when they drove home. In the East a star shone over a white world and a strange new sense of peace and security possessed Emil, but he knew it would not last. He was a stranger and they had taken him in, though they knew nothing about him, or perhaps, he reflected, because they knew nothing.

He put the horses in the stable and when he came to the house Mary was making tea. There were blue cups on a yellow checked cloth and Peter was toasting bread on a long fork over the coals. An array of bedding was spread on chairs about the fire.

"The blankets from your bed," Mary explained. "The stove-pipe goes through the room and it's

fairly warm, but I like to have a bed bone dry before I put anyone into it."

Emil's mother had done that for him when he had come home on Saturday nights from work for farmers in the Old Land. But oh, the places where he had slept in the years since—last night a straw stack, before that the cold, bare room up the back stairs of the big Dafoe house, hard beds in the cheapest of cheap boarding houses, on the floors of box cars . . . and a narrow iron bed. He must tell them. That the woman should warm his blankets, as she would for an honoured guest, was more than he could stand. His heart pounded, his throat was dry, and below a scar under his collar, a pulse throbbed so that his voice did everything but make the words he wanted. But finally he heard himself speaking.

"You been goot to me and, I got somet'ing I must say to you. Den you would not vant me, maybe, in your house."

It was hard to go on—even harder than he had imagined it would be, to tell of the weeks of misery of mind and body—grief, hunger, loneliness, not even a bare room of his own, and the devil of despair whispering all the time of a way out; of a moment of blackness, and coming to in a hospital ward to find that life would not let him go; then the law stepping in—even a man's life, it seemed, however poor a thing it might be, was not his own; after that the long months of punishment and the

struggle to find a place in society again. Usually, when he let himself think of it, it was so bitterly wrong that he felt enemy to all mankind, but he could not be bitter in the face of the kindness these people had shown him. He felt only shame that he had met his Gethsemane so weakly, and he knew that when he had told them, he would always be ashamed before them. But he must go on. He tried again:

"Before I shleep in your house, I must tell you——"

Peter had evidently guessed something of his struggle.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he said, "not to-night anyway—a year from now, if you want to, but no need of it."

"But you treat me like a brodder. You don't know me. Is it dat you shust take shtranger in, maybe, on Christmas eve?"

"I know a man better after seeing him tending cattle for an hour than I'd know him in a year of ordinary meeting now and then. But yes, I hope we'd take in anyone on Christmas eve or any time. You see the light Mary has in the window? It isn't there just on Christmas eve, but every night when there's a storm and she thinks someone might be needing shelter. When you've been here a while you'll find its Christmas with her the year round.

"About your homestead: You'll have a good place there when you get some land ready for crop. I suppose the Land Agent told you you'd have some

heavy timber to cut? But perhaps you're not afraid of a little extra work with an axe."

"No," Emil smiled. "I like vork. I'm not afraid of the trees."

He was not afraid of anything now—not even of the black loneliness that had hovered over him like a vulture, always ready to clutch at him in these last hard years in a strange land. He felt that at last he was with friends.

## CHAPTER XVI

**I** THINK 'The Travellers' Rest' has met its master," Peter observed to Mary, after he had seen their new neighbour at his spring breaking. "I never saw such a man to work. I wouldn't have thought anyone could come in here without horses or implements—nothing but his bare hands and an axe—and make a go of it. But Emil will. Anyone in the settlement would be glad to change work with him."

Most of Emil's exchange of work was with Peter. And what headway the two of them made when they worked together! One day when they were cutting trees not far from the house, Mary took John out for a little while to watch them. One axe swung after the other in steady, regular rhythm, and the wood flew in great chips from the depth of their strokes. At the same instant, without a word, they stepped away from the swaying trunk. They knew just when the tree would fall, and where. As it came crashing through the brush, John squealed and waved his arms in keen approval. It was great to see the trees coming down. He would have liked to be at it himself.

Quite naturally, perhaps. John was providing

a new incentive for Peter in his zest for making land. He must get on with his farming in order to be able to give his son a start when the time came for it. And having another high-powered worker like Emil in the field was an added stimulant. Their work together had in it something of the interest of a game.

Mary was troubled because it seemed impossible to get Emil to mix in the neighbourhood life. It was true that he was naturally shy, and his English was not good, but these did not seem sufficient excuse for his keeping to himself as he did, spending Sunday afternoons alone in his own house, never leaving his wood-cutting for a Friday afternoon singing class, even though he had all of his countrymen's love of music; but of course he had his land to clear. Letters from Germany came regularly in the mail for him, and he always slipped them into his pocket without a word or any sign of interest, other than the slow rising of a bright colour from his neck to his fair, straight hair.

But he dropped in for a chat with the Shoedeckers often, and he was a comfortable person to have around. As he talked with Peter of crops and cattle, or of Germany as it was when he left it and as he heard of it through letters since, his hands were usually busy carving a piece of wood into something for John—a box or a sheep or a block with a letter on it. John seemed to find these more interesting than his less simple playthings.

Emil lived meagrely and seemed to thrive on it. Mary baked bread for him, and sometimes she slipped other things into his basket—a jar of cottage cheese mixed with milk, like the German smarkase, a pound of butter, the end of a cooked ham. He was appreciative but independent, and easily embarrassed. One day at noon when he came in from work with Peter, his shirt was torn from the shoulder to the waist, and his back was badly sunburned. With the motherliness that life in this new country was developing in her out of all proportion to her years, Mary said,

“You’ve torn your shirt. Go and put on one of Peter’s and I’ll mend yours.”

He blushed furiously, but he let her mend his shirt. He could stand the sunburn, but he could not afford a new shirt, and this one would certainly be torn past mending if he wore it the rest of the day as it was.

Emil’s house had the barest furnishings, but one day he offered to take Peter’s horses to town and do the weekly shopping for the Shoedeckers and the neighbours; and he came back with the waggon piled with a bed and chairs and a table and a few other household effects. He had heard some time before, that there was to be an auction sale in town that day. When Peter and Mary showed their astonishment, he explained a bit sheepishly,

“I vant to get married dis fall.”

"Oh!" said the Shoedeckers, and "Well!"

"She vill come from Germany, Anna, dis fall," he told them. (So that explained the letters from the Old Country.) "I haff not much to bring her to yet, but t'ings iss bad in Germany, too. She vant to come. Ve'll get on."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Mary enthused. This was a most happy arrangement, that Emil, who was lonely and so shy with strangers, should have a girl of his own, coming from his own country. Mary wanted to hear him talk about her.

"What is she like?" she asked him.

"I didn't seen her yet," he replied naturally. "Ven my mutter vas sick, Anna take care of her. My mutter she die, Anna write me letter. Ve write efer since. My mutter know her vell—she say she awful nice girl. My mutter say she like the corn," he smiled, "tall and shtraight up, mit yellow hair. I didn't seen her yet."

The fact that he had not seen her yet did not seem to bother him at all. His mother had known her; she was a nice girl; and there had evidently been something in her letters that had met his need through the lonely years.

She came in September, Emil's Anna. He did not go to the Junction to meet her—even a short railway journey costs something, and they would need every dollar he had to "get a start" on their farm, to provide the barest necessities for their house. But with Peter's horses and waggon, wearing

his faded blue suit and a very close, new haircut, he left the farm hours earlier than was necessary in order to be waiting for her when the train came in to Elkton. They would be married by the Lutheran minister there.

"I wonder if we should offer to go with him?" Peter had asked his wife.

"No," she told him definitely. "Don't forget that they haven't seen each other yet. They'll get along better by themselves."

But they were to have supper with the Shoedeckers, and Mary made a wedding cake and tried to give the table a festive air befitting the occasion.

When they came they were very self-conscious, Anna especially, for she could not speak a word of English, and Emil had to act as interpreter for the few things she wished to say. She was a big girl, "tall like the corn," as his mother had described her, with broad hips and sun-browned hands. Her yellow hair was wound around her head in braids, and somehow, in spite of the dust of her long journey, she had kept it clean and shining. She was fresh and strong and wholesome, with intelligence and kindness in her blue eyes. John, who seemed to have an unerring judgment of human nature, made friends with her at once. They understood each other's language perfectly. When he showed her his wooden blocks and animals she smiled her approval at Emil—she had seen such work of his before; in her chest she had a wooden sewing-box

with a design of hearts and flowers cleverly carved in the lid. As they drove off through the woods to their own place, with Anna's boxes piled in the back of the waggon—they would be filled with no furbelows of dress, those boxes, but with linens and blankets and furnishings for her house—the Shoedeckers told each other that Emil had done well. His letters had probably accomplished more than he could ever have done if he had had to depend on his slow tongue, and his social initiative which was all shyness where women were concerned.

. . . . .

Another good harvest gave the settlers of Poplar Hill a feeling of something almost like prosperity. They had still much to do to make the smooth, cultivated farms of older places; there were many things they wanted for their homes; but they had gone far enough now to have an assurance of security in the future. They were building a community, too. They had a social and educational and religious centre in their little log school. The Catholic priest came regularly now, and the Joliettes, a family of influence in the section, were bringing in the scattered Catholic families and an occasional bachelor homesteader who had become careless about his church duties.

The non-Catholics were helping to keep a second Protestant missionary in the district, so they had church services every two weeks instead of once

a month. On alternate Sundays the people themselves conducted a Sunday School. No one felt equal to teaching the adult class, so the grown-up members simply sat together and held a sort of open forum, the discussions of which often went far adrift of the topic from which they started. But that did not seem to trouble anyone. They knew that it was good for them to bring their children and meet once a week in a sort of religious atmosphere. And they enjoyed singing hymns together and having a little neighbourly visit around the fire when the service was over.

Jim Irwin opened the Friday afternoon singing classes again, and men and women coming to the class took books from the library home with them. They liked the singing and the books so much that they almost forgot about the contest that had provided a reason for such community benefits—which was more than either Jane Meadows or Peter could have hoped for. The contest was to run over a period of three years anyway; there was no need to be excited about it yet. In the meantime, those who took the weekly edition of *The Clarion*, read Mary's stories and were glad to see Poplar Hill getting some publicity.

The longer fall evenings gave Peter and Mary more time for reading again. Peter was especially interested in any news of proposed plans to re-establish agriculture in the dry areas—he was more than ever concerned for his old neighbours and

other farmers in the South, for there was still no harvest there. Looking over the Elkton paper when the mail came on Saturday, he said to Mary.

"They're sending a carload of feed and vegetables to the South from Elkton next week. We'll have to see what Poplar Hill can do."

And on the day the car was loaded, almost every farmer in the settlement drove into town with a contribution. They took no little pride in this. Only a few years ago some of them had been on farms in the dry section, without a stook of grain to thresh or a sack of potatoes to put in the cellar for winter. Now through the bounty of Nature—and their own labours, of course—they were able to give of their harvest.

Emil went to town with Peter that day. When they came back he stopped at the house for a few minutes before he went home; and he seemed either amused or very much pleased about something.

"Pete make shpeech to-day," he told Mary. And when she did not understand, he explained, "Election come soon, ain't it? Vell, some man from city he talk—tell all vat he do for farmers mit no rain, no crop. Lots peoples dere. An' he say, anyone ask question? An' Pete shtand shtraight up like a hops-pole an' ask somet'ing—I not hear—everyone clap an' yell so, an' den, Pete make shpeech. You ask him."

And Emil went off chuckling. He could not get over the joke of his quiet neighbour standing up and talking to "maybe hundred peoples."

"What is this about you making a speech?" Mary asked Peter when he came in.

"Oh!"—and he reddened a little—"there was a political meeting in town, and when we got the car loaded we all dropped in. An organizer from the city was telling about his party's economy platform, and how the dry country would come back—all the farmers needed to do was to sit tight and keep their courage; and he told what farmers themselves could do to keep the sand from blowing, and how the other parties' plans for irrigation and reforestation would impoverish the whole province, including ourselves 'who had had the courage to step out and make homes up here' and so on. And then he called for questions, and I asked just how a man on land that had had no rain to speak of for five years, could start a grass crop to hold the sand. He wanted to know what I thought the Government should do, and I told him. That was all."

"Were you nervous?"

"No. I was just explaining what I thought might be done, with a little Government help, to get ahead of trouble in another dry spell. Any farmer could have told him."

Mary was sure that "any farmer" could not have told him—not as Peter could. She knew

something of what he would say, and she smiled, thinking with a quick pride, how surprised the politician from the city must have been, when a young farmer, wearing the blue overalls and lumber-jack's boots that Peter always wore when he was handling potatoes, stood up in the meeting, and in his slow, simple speech, proceeded to show how the theories that had sounded so plausible were entirely impractical, and why any political party's ethics of "every man for himself" were antedated by two thousand years.

. . . . .

And then Mary was to do some speech-making herself. She had scarcely recovered from her surprise at Peter's venture, when she received an astonishing letter from the Women's Canadian Club in the city. Their executive had been reading her articles in *The Clarion*, the secretary wrote, and Miss Severn had told them more than even these conveyed. They understood that she was a real pioneer woman herself, and they would like her to come and talk to them about "The Possibilities of The North Country," or "Homesteading In The Bush," or something like that. They would pay her expenses, of course, and their usual lecturer's fee, twenty dollars.

She read the letter and handed it to Peter.

"You'd like to go, wouldn't you?" he asked when he had read it.

"I hardly know," she considered. "Anyway I couldn't leave John."

"Sure you could. We could get Anna to keep him in the daytime—he's always contented there—and I'd bring him home at nights. It would make a nice change for you, and you wouldn't be away long."

She supposed it could be arranged. John would be safe with Anna, and he would be at home with Peter at nights. She supposed, too, that she should be elated over the prospect of a trip, after being so constantly at home for four years, but for some reason she was not altogether happy at the thought of leaving her family. If anything should happen to them she would be a long way from home and trains were slow and made the journey only three times a week. She was not worried about the speech she would have to make; she knew the club and she had a lot to tell them about the life and the people of the North. Of course she decided to go.

"You'll need some new clothes," Peter said to her one night, and dropped a roll of bills in her lap. He had taken a load of seed potatoes to town that day, though it was not the time of year when he usually sold them. "In town you're supposed to have a special sort of dress for morning, noon and night, aren't you?" he added, when she seemed embarrassed about the money.

"I don't think I'll need anything new," she said. "They want a picture of pioneering life and

I'm a pioneer woman. A woman doesn't wear an evening dress on a homestead. Anyway, I talk to them in the afternoon, and the last dress I got by mail order is an afternoon dress—the catalogue said so—and it's still new. I'll wear it, and if they ask where a woman on a farm in the woods gets her clothes, I'll refer them to this and tell them it cost me 'nine-ninety-eight.' Besides, if I spend a lot of money on clothes, where would be the profit in going? I'm doing this partly to make some money, you know. What that twenty dollars is going to do for us!"

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. Just for a second she was afraid that he did not like to think of it, but he seemed to forget it immediately.

She was to remember it herself later.

. . . . .

The club meeting was a triumph—almost. The women were interested in what Mary had to tell them and if she omitted anything that Ann Severn thought would add to the story, Ann was there to remind her.

"Tell us what a woman does if she is on her way to a sick neighbour, and finds a load of wood blocking the road," Ann prompted. And Mary had to tell them about her trip the night the Olsen baby was born.

It seemed that nothing she had ever reported to Ann, either for publication or in casual conver-

sation, remained hidden. But when the meeting was over, and the president said she was sure they had never had a more interesting address in all the club's history, Mary was rather pleased with herself.

Then there was a tea and "an opportunity for the members to meet the speaker personally." It was here that Mary learned how little impression her interpretation of the country and its people had made on some of her audience.

"That poor soul who died when her baby was born!" one woman lamented—she was an important woman, active in many clubs. "To think that sort of thing is allowed to go on in this day of civilization! The Government should stop people from going into places like that, miles away from doctors!"

"Not many new parts of the world would have been opened up yet, if pioneers had waited for that," Mary wanted to say, but checked herself. After all the woman was partly right.

"Isn't there something we could do for you?" another member offered. "Books from some of our libraries, perhaps? Only the other day the librarian here showed me a great pile of discards going to a lumber camp or somewhere. For a girl like yourself, it must be awful to be without books."

"We have a library," Mary explained—she had already told about the library—"and it just happens

that an English neighbour lends my husband and me some wonderful books that we could never afford to buy ourselves. You never know when you're going to find a person like that in a new country."

"Oh is that the Englishman, the musician?" And the woman added archly, "Better be careful there—the attraction of mutual interests, you know."

"And that," said Mary coolly, "is something you do not find in a new country—at least not among the people I know. It's strange, isn't it, how the things that stand for good form, or good breeding, vary in different communities?" But she was sorry afterwards, about that, for Ann who had overheard, whispered that the woman's husband had a roving eye—not that the wife seemed to care; she had many other interests.

Still another woman innocently left a little sting when she said:

"I've been thinking about the children—and I suppose you have scads of them; a new place always has."

"Not more than we want," Mary put in almost too quickly; but she laughed as she said it, and the woman continued, unperturbed.

"When I think of the advantages our children have in a city like this! Now my boy—he's just ten—goes to the 'Y' for swimming lessons, takes violin from a German professor, has a dancing class with

Miss Zephyr—you've heard of her classes I'm sure—gets manual training along with his school lessons, and this year he's taking fancy skating at the skating club, and conversational French from a real Parisian teacher. It's really marvellous, the breadth of education you can give a child in a city like this."

"It is indeed," Mary agreed. Then with a twinkle she began: "Well, our son is just two, and dear knows how the school system may have changed by the time he's ready for it! But, so far as I can see now, his father will teach him to swim—in fact he's already planning how he can make a safe swimming hole from a pond on our place, for the boys of the neighbourhood; and he'll no doubt learn to skate without much encouragement from anyone—everyone up North skates; we have ice for a good part of the year, you know. John will probably never have an opportunity to take violin lessons from a German professor, but we have a German neighbour who has a habit of playing the mouth-organ when he goes for the cows; John admires him a lot, so I wouldn't be surprised to find him doing the same thing. He will probably never have dancing lessons, unless some girl undertakes to teach him in twenty years or so. But as for manual training, his father is the best carpenter I have ever known; he can make anything, from a house to a rocking chair; so I think our boy will grow up knowing how to use tools. He will miss the con-

versational French—and I'm sorry for that—but considering the way people of all nationalities are pouring into our districts, by the time he's grown up he should be able to make himself understood in seven languages at least. . . . Don't think I don't appreciate the advantages of your schools—I only wish we had them for every child in the country—but there are compensations, ways of making up, with the things we can have, for those we must do without.”

In spite of her gay defence of the simple life on a homestead, all this well-intentioned sympathy was leaving Mary feeling rather low, when an old woman sitting in a corner by herself, beckoned her to a chair beside her. She was fragile, and withered, and sweet as a rose pressed in an old Bible. She wore black lace and little satin slippers with buckles, and she was both regal and kindly.

“You must be very happy, child,” she said. “It's in your eyes and your voice. One doesn't find just that so often nowadays. Most of the women, there's no peace in them. They laugh too much and talk too fast, saying pert things because they think it's expected of them; they're always trying to keep up with something, afraid of losing their youth or their man. You're not afraid of that, are you? And when the sun sets on one day, you're not afraid of having nothing to do the next?” She laughed a merry little tinkle. “I know,” she went

on, "I pioneered with my husband on the prairie; lived in a sod shack; and when I waken in the night now, I'm still back in our little sod house, the nicest house we ever had.

"We were fortunate in buying and selling land, and my husband was well on the way to being one of the leading men in politics in the West. He died before he was forty. . . . When I heard what you said this afternoon—or what you told us without saying it—you made me think of myself fifty years ago. . . . You have something very precious, something that half the women here would envy you; let an old woman tell you to treasure it. If anything should happen, you'll know what I mean."

The members of the executive came to speak to Mary. They were more than pleased with her talk, they said; they thought she had something of value for every club in the West, and the head office had asked them to be on the look out for speakers. Would she consider going on a tour for two or three weeks, later in the winter?

When Mary got to her room in the hotel, her head was swimming. Back of everything there was just the merest little ache left from the pity of the women who were unconsciously patronizing. Next to that was the sweetness of the wise old woman who had said, "You have something very precious . . . if anything should happen. . . ." What could happen? And jumbling everything together

so that she could not think clearly, was the flattering and upsetting offer to go on a speaking tour.

She must write to Peter. She had intended to write to him anyway, of course—she was not going home until Thursday—and if she could get a letter off within the next half-hour it would catch the night mail. The privacy of the hotel room was pleasant after the strain of the meeting and the stir of the tea party. She slipped off her dress and bathed her burning face, revelling in the hot and cold water that came with the turning of a tap, in the comfort of an open window and steam heat, the carpet soft and deep under her feet.

“If only you and John were here, everything would be perfect,” she wrote, after listing these luxuries. The rest of the letter, except the last and most important messages written up and down the margins, was about the possible lecture tour and—if they decided she should go—the cash returns and what they could do with these. She took the letter to the desk to be sure it would get into the mail going north. She was beginning to wonder how they were getting along at home, just what they would be doing at this particular hour. Surely John would not fret for her—but of course he would not miss her really; he was always contented with either Anna or Peter and he went to sleep early at night, never protested when they said it was bedtime; there was something almost pathetic

in the way a baby trusted you. She hoped she was not going to be homesick. And she wished that that old lady, lovely as she was, had not said so much about "if anything should happen."

She was to go to the Dougalds', her old editor's home, for dinner. She had told them not to call for her, and she walked a block out of her way, just to pass a certain restaurant where she had had supper with Peter once nearly four years ago. She even looked in as she passed, almost expecting to see herself sitting there, and Peter hanging up his overcoat and coming back to her. What was the matter with her anyway? In two days she would be at home, and she was not at all enthusiastic about the prospect of leaving again for any lecturing trip, whatever it might offer her. Was she just homesick, or was it because she was Irish and so given to superstition that a chance remark of a sentimental old lady could upset her so?

She felt better when she was with the Dougalds. They asked about Peter and John, of course, and about the homestead, and as she told them of all Peter had accomplished in four years, she became aware of the way the old couple were beaming on her. Then they inquired about her meeting that afternoon, and because it was very much on her mind, she told them about the proposed speaking tour.

"Do you like talking?" Mr. Dougald asked.

"Not entirely. Of course I like talking about the North country better than I would about anything else."

"And you feel you should go?"

"Well—on a homestead, you know, it takes a long time to earn two hundred dollars."

"I wonder," he reasoned. "From what I can gather about what Peter has done since he went there, he must be putting that into the farm many times over in a year. What do you suppose your place would be worth if you wanted to sell it now?"

"You can't sell a farm now. No one wants to buy one."

"Not just now, perhaps, but in a few years, when things come back, you'll find lots of people ready to buy a farm and to pay for it. But that isn't the point. What is it worth to you yourselves?"

"Oh—a great deal. We wouldn't want to leave it at all."

Mr. Dougald seemed relieved.

"That's just what I was wanting to know," he said. "I wonder if you've heard the news—but there'd be no way you could hear it. Did you know they were going to offer Peter the nomination as candidate for the provincial election? It seems he's very well thought of in the district, and that he made a speech at some political meeting in Elkton, that just put the cap sheaf on things."

"But"—Mary stammered, "I don't think Peter would want it. Of course, I don't know."

"Well, the committee seem to have thought of everything. They reckoned he couldn't go to Parliament and handle his farm as he would want to, so they're trying to make a job for him looking after irrigation and seeding and other things they plan to do if they get in. Then you could sell the farm and move to town. They were going out to see Peter to-day or to-morrow. If he does think of taking it, he'll not likely give them an answer till he has talked it over with you."

No, she thought Peter would wait until they had talked it over—but perhaps when he got her letter, raving about the comforts of the city, and showing her hunger for money, or for the things it would buy, he would feel that he knew what she would want him to do. Not that that would decide a thing so important to all of them, but she did not want him to think that she felt that way. She did not want to leave the farm. She was more than content with what they had, when she thought of leaving it. And perhaps it was selfish—no doubt the country needed a man like Peter to manage its affairs—but just for a little while longer anyway, she wanted them to have this close, intimate, day-in-day-out life on the land together. "You have something very precious; let an old woman tell you to treasure it. If anything should happen. . . ." Yes, if anything

should happen—and she would not be home until Friday night.

At dinner they talked of other things. At ten o'clock Mary said quietly:

"I believe I'll take the train home to-night instead of waiting till Thursday."

"Yes?" said Mr. Dougald, almost as if he had expected it. "It doesn't go for two hours yet. We'll take you to the station."

. . . . .

Mary got the thrasher from Elkton to drive her out to the homestead. He had heard that she had been making a speech in the city and he thought it very funny.

"You'll be already trained to go out stumping for Pete," he teased her. "You know they want him to run for Member here?"

"I heard something about it."

"The committee went out to see him to-day. I don't know how they made out."

So she had heard "something about it." He thought he knew now why she had come home in such a hurry. She was a city girl; no doubt she was ready to snatch at any chance to get out of the woods. Maybe it wouldn't be such a tough job as the committee expected to pry old Pete off the land.

There was no one at the house or the barn when they arrived, and the thrasher could not stay for

supper, he said, so he had to leave without any news of the committee's interview.

Not finding Peter at home did not trouble Mary. There was a fire banked up in the stove so he was not far away; he had gone to Krupps' for John, no doubt. But the kitchen had already taken on the neglected look of a man's housekeeping, and no wonder. With John safely handed over to Anna in the morning, she knew how little time Peter would spend in the house through the day. From the dishes on the pantry table she knew what he had had to eat at noon; it was no meal at all for a man working as he did. She would surprise him with the best supper he had had for days. It was only a few minutes' work to bring a jar of canned chicken from the cellar and get a chicken pie in the oven. She stirred up the fire, changed her dress, set the room to rights and put a clean cloth on the table. Then she heard the horses coming into the yard and there they were! John looked so little as Peter lifted him down from the waggon! Why he was only a baby! And she had left him for three days. She had intended to stay a week. And Peter! It was altogether foolish, but she was actually feeling again a girl's wonder at the miracle that in a few minutes he would be here with her.

When they came to the door she opened it. There was a cry from John, then he had buried his face in her neck and was sobbing his heart out. And

Mary was crying, too. Even Peter's eyes were shining.

"He never cried all the time you were away," Peter explained, "but I knew it was coming. Oh, but we were lonesome! What happened?"

"I guess I was homesick," she confessed.

"Did you make your speech?"

"Yes. Did anything happen here?"

"Not a thing. It just got worse all the time."

"And nothing important happened?"

"No—Oh, yes! Star had her calf and it's another heifer. That's three in a row. How's that for dairy-man's luck?"

"Peter!" she rebuked him. "Why don't you tell me? I heard about you even in the city—that you're a possible Member of Parliament."

"Oh, that!" he laughed. "I don't know how that got started. Yes, they were out here about it."

"And you're not wanting it?"

"Oh dear, no! I couldn't do that. You know about how far I'd go in politics. I'm not quick at turning a corner."

"No," she agreed happily. "Anyone who knew you would know before you started just what direction you would take, and that they could count on you to the end of the road."

"Of course this last while I've been more interested than I ever was before, in what Governments are doing—our own and others, and I don't think we'll

get anywhere till more of the common people start to really care what happens."

He was off then on some of his convictions as to what should be done to put into effect his solid, Quaker doctrine of the brotherhood of men. At the same time, with infinite patience he was teaching John that he must not squeeze the kitten. Finally to escape the clutching baby hands, the kitten scampered up onto Peter's knee for safety.

"The kitten's tired," Peter explained and took it out to its basket in the shed. When he came back John's face was flushed and full of fight. He did not want the kitten taken away.

"He not tired," he stated flatly.

"That's right, son," his father said, covering his surprise. "Use your eyes and don't let anyone make up your mind for you. He didn't look tired, did he? But he's had a busy day. I saw his mother taking him to the woods this morning; they were looking for some catnip, I suppose." And from there on, with John's help, he pieced out quite an interesting story of the kitten's adventures of the day.

"You weren't caring about that election business? You don't want to leave here, do you?" Peter asked Mary, later.

"Not ever," she assured him.

"And were you really homesick?"

Then she told about the old lady who still wakened from her dreams thinking she was back in her first

sod house on the prairie, whose husband had died while they were still young, and who had said, "You must be happy. . . . You have something very precious; let an old woman tell you to treasure it. If anything should happen——"

"And that," she explained, "was why I couldn't stay away any longer."

His reply to this was not quite audible. Sometimes Peter did not have to say much to make himself understood.

. . . . .

"I'm sorry I have to go away, the first day you're home, but we're having a bee hauling straw for Jack Ritchie," Peter announced at breakfast.

There was nothing unusual in that; he often had to be away from home helping at a bee for one of the neighbours. And when he did not come home as early as he had expected, Mary was not worried; she had already forgotten her fear that something might happen to her family while she was away from them. John kept watch at the window as he always did towards evening, and when a horse turned into the yard he shouted the news to his mother as usual.

But it was not Peter. It was Jack Ritchie and Anna Krupp. They came to the door together, and when she saw them Mary knew that something had happened.

"It's Peter," Jack managed to say.

"But what? Where is he?" She came out of the house and was almost past them. Wherever Peter was she was going to him.

"They've taken him to the hospital," Jack began; he was finding it difficult to speak. "Emil took him. Emil sent me to bring Anna to stay with John, and I'm to take you in. Emil said to take Peter's other team; they'd be faster than mine."

Mary was very white.

"Tell me—how badly is he hurt?" she demanded quietly.

"I don't know," Jack answered, and looked away. "I guess we should hurry," he added and went to get the horses.

Anna said nothing. The few words of English that she knew had deserted her and they were inadequate, anyway. She picked John up and held him so he would not cry as his mother went away.

"I shtay here," she promised simply. There was no need to say more.

"What happened?" Mary asked as they drove away.

"The ladder broke," Jack explained with difficulty. "I was on the stack and the wind was blowing. I guess Pete saw I was cold—I haven't got a sheep-skin yet this winter—and he said, 'Let me up there,' and he came up, and when he stepped on the top rung, clear of everything, where there was nothing to catch hold of, it broke—and he fell back."

"Did he say for me to come?" Any message from Peter would be a comfort.

"He—he didn't say anything more—he fell on the back of his head."

The rest of the drive was a nightmare of imaginings far too vivid, and miles of road that it seemed would never end.

"Do you think we might overtake them—Emil and Peter?" she asked once, straining forward and peering through the half-dark to see if there was anyone on the road ahead.

"I don't think so. Emil said he'd run the horses and when they tired he'd change at any farm he came to. Jim Irwin's with them."

The little hospital with its log walls and windows pouring light out on to the snow, had a friendly look. One did not expect to have to sit on a bench while a nurse padded off for a report, and horrible things happened behind doors that were closed; but inside it had the business-like air of all hospitals, the same smell of ether and carbolic. Mary went direct to the probationer at the desk.

"I want to see Peter Shoedecker; I'm his wife," she said.

"Mr. Shoedecker is not conscious," the girl replied calmly.

"May I see the doctor right away?"

"I'm sorry. The doctor is operating."

Just then a man in a white gown came from a room at the far end of the corridor and went into

another room. That would be the doctor, of course. He did not look at Mary. Nurses, almost running, went in and out of the room where the doctor was. Clearly there was trouble there. She could scarcely hold herself from forcing her way into the room too, but that, of course, she must not do. She went to the girl at the desk again.

"Will you tell the doctor, as soon as he's through, that I want to see him?" she asked.

The girl said she would, and went on with the report she was making. The telephone rang and she took down the receiver.

"Yes," she said, and again "Yes," and in a lower voice, "Pretty bad . . . yes. . . . The doctor's operating now."

After a while the doctor came out, and crossed the corridor, still without a glance in the direction of the visitors' bench. Mary looked at the girl at the desk and she immediately got up and went to the room where the doctor was. She came back with the same official unconcern.

"The doctor will see you in a few minutes," she reported and went back to her work.

Then the doctor came. "Mrs. Shoedecker?" he said, and while he wasted no words there was a sound kindness about him, and you knew he would tell you the truth. "I'm sorry I hadn't time to speak to you before, but we're having a busy day. A boy was just brought in from twenty miles back—got his hand caught in a saw. Your husband

isn't conscious yet and I wanted to explain before you went in. It's concussion—no fracture. It may take him a while yet to come out of it, but he'll be all right. He's upstairs. I'll go up with you in a minute."

His eyes went to the outer door. A woman was coming in. Her hat had slipped to the side of her head; her grey hair, loosened from its knot had blown about her face; she had a man's overcoat over her own thin coat. The hospital was evidently entirely strange to her and she was plainly frightened, either of the place itself or of what she was to find there. The doctor did not wait to have her inquire at the desk. He went to her at once and took her hand.

"You're Joe Thompson's mother, aren't you?" he said. "The man who brought Joe said you'd be along. He's going to be all right. We've operated and he isn't out of the ether yet, but we're going to save the hand—almost as good as it ever was."

She was crying now—just a little. A hard life had taught her to bear hard things.

"They told me it was—was so he would have to lose it," she explained.

The doctor patted her shoulder.

"It was pretty bad," he admitted, "but we're going to save it. He'll have to stay here a while. I want to watch it closely. And he's going to have a bad time for a day or two, but we'll take care of him."

"Joe won't mind the suffering when he knows he'll have his hand," she said. "They said it was that—not the pain—that drove him almost crazy when it happened."

Jim Irwin was in the room with Peter, but he went out when Mary and the doctor came. Jim did not seem worried that Peter's brain was still benumbed.

"I've seen it happen in football," he said. "I was worried about what else might be wrong, but he was lucky."

Mary wondered if they were just trying to make things easy for her. To see Peter like this, helpless, unable to see or hear or speak to them, was terrible. Then he opened his eyes, seemed to see that she was there, and closed them again to rest for a while before he made another effort to struggle back to consciousness. Jim Irwin was in and out. Jack Ritchie came and sat on the bench in the hall; he would be there to take Mary home when she was ready to go. Emil, when there was nothing more he could do, had driven back to the farm to attend to things there. And it was typical of the hospitality of this new country, that when news spread about town that Peter Shoedecker had been brought to the hospital and that his wife and two neighbours were in town, at least five homes offered them shelter for the night. A storekeeper called for Jim Irwin, the thresher came for Jack, Mary slept on a cot at the hospital.

In the morning Peter said he felt fine; he was ready to go home. But the doctor laughed at him. "In about three days we'll think of it," he said. And when Peter raised his head, he was glad to lie back and rest, glad to be where he could have the eye of a doctor like this over him while these strange, new pains tormented the back of his head.

"Come back for him on Sunday," the doctor told Mary. "Better leave him pretty much alone till then."

On Sunday Emil went for Peter, and Mary made things ready for him at home. A little reluctantly she had invited Emil and Anna to have supper with them, but Anna, with characteristic understanding had said "No." With gestures she explained that Peter's head would ache, he would be tired, they would stay away for a few days and give him a chance to rest. And when Emil came to get the horses she sent a coffee cake with him. No one in the neighbourhood could make coffee cake like Anna's. She tried to show the other women how to do it, took infinite pains to teach them, but it seemed to take a German hand to give it that rich brown crustiness, a certain nuttiness of flavour all its own. Emil was very much pleased when he delivered the cake to Mary. He was proud of Anna's cooking.

"She make us up already von for supper, too," he said when Mary praised it. Emil was not the discouraged, lost young man who had stumbled in

out of the snow a year ago. Life here had been very kind to him. And a girl like Anna, and a coffee cake like that, were something for a man to come home to.

So Mary would have the coffee cake for supper and other things that Peter liked and that could safely be given to a man coming from the hospital. And she brought the arm-chair from the sitting-room and put it beside the fire. John would be asleep when his father came—and that might be a little disappointing, but John's welcomes were very enthusiastic, and she remembered how quickly Peter had dropped back on the pillow when he had tried to get up at the hospital three days ago.

She did not know they had arrived until she heard a quick step at the door and there he was. But he was no invalid. He was quite himself again. "It seems this trouble leaves you about as suddenly as it comes," he explained.

"And do you feel just the same as you did before it happened?" Mary asked in wonder.

"No," he told her. "I've been seeing visions," and his eyes were shining as if he might be seeing them still. "I've heard that after a long sickness the sky looks bluer and the grass greener than it ever did before. Well, the same thing seems to have happened to me, only it isn't the sky or the grass I've been seeing. . . . I guess I needed an accident like this to make me really see my neighbours. Take Emil: he's a great man. He'd go through

fire and water for a friend and keep his head while he was doing it. Or Jack Ritchie. Some folks think Jack's careless; he was ready to take on himself the whole responsibility for my fall because it was his ladder that broke. It's the same with a lot of the others. I've just been seeing what they are at their best. And while I was lying there and had nothing else to do, I got to thinking that if the life of neighbours was all it should be, they would help each other to be their best all the time.

"I've always known there was a future for this bush country, of course, but I was seeing acres of ploughed fields, and cattle at pasture, and big barns, and nice houses, and good market roads, and schools, and churches. A lot of these won't come in my time. But there are things we can have right now—more getting together as neighbours to talk over things that matter, trying to put a right way of living before the children growing up, having more singing together, looking outside our bush boundaries to see how the rest of the world is faring, and feeling that it's our concern, that we're a part of it. As I see the new settlers pouring in here, all needing something, all with something to give, and I remember that we got the country new, and have it in our hands to make it what we like, I think the angels in Heaven must almost envy us our opportunity."

"I know," Mary agreed. "Still there is the endless work of clearing the bush and making farms.

The settlers around here have been pretty busy doing just that alone, and it seems to take about fifteen hours a day."

"Oh, we'll still have to keep our feet on the ground so far as ploughing and planting and wood-cutting are concerned," he admitted, "but, as Jane says, we'll stop oftener to 'look up at the sky.'

"I've been thinking about ourselves, too—you and John and me. The old lady who said we have something fine, worth keeping, was right. But I get so set on making land, to raise more crops, to build a better house, or to have a fine farm to give John, that I sometimes lose sight of the things that matter more.

"While I was lying in the hospital that first night, hardly knowing where I was, I was a youngster again, back at our old place down East with my folks. I never realized before, how fine they made things for me then. And I know now, that it won't matter to John how many acres of land I clear. But if he doesn't have a good time while he's little, if he doesn't learn how to live so he can be about the best it's in him to be—then we've cheated him out of something.

"And just a bigger house won't mean much to us when times are better here, if we don't *live* as we go along. You don't make a wonderful thing of marriage, just working at it in the tag ends of your time. Hard working people like ourselves, get the idea that it's only the 'idle rich,' men and women

who have nothing to do but get into mischief, who wreck marriages. I have a hunch that a lot of marriages are killed because people are so dog-tired with work all the time, that they have no more spirit left to be interested in each other, than if they were dead for sleep, or seasick.

"Even the lack of interests outside of ourselves in a place like this—unless we make them, or having to do without what Ann Severn calls 'the stimulation of beauty,' might be a danger."

"But we have so much——" Mary protested, "a home that is our own from the ground up, and every chance to make whatever we like of it."

It was a nice house, even now, she reflected. In spite of its smallness it was comfortable, or at least as comfortable as they could make it for the present. Even the kitchen, with its board walls painted a daffodil yellow, and green curtains at the windows, was a cheerful place. There was always a wood fire crackling away, and just now the tea-kettle was singing its head off. She had almost forgotten the kettle. She rose now to finish putting the supper on the table.

As she passed the window she looked out, and stopped. The woods, pushed well back from the house now, made a sharp black wall above the snow, and the sky was ablaze with Northern Lights.

"Did Ann say we needed 'the stimulation of beauty'?" she called to Peter. "Come here."

He came, and for minutes they watched the flaming sky without a word.

"I don't believe I've ever seen them so lovely—not since the night I came here," said Mary.

Peter smiled down at her.

"There's a lot in the way you look at them," he said.

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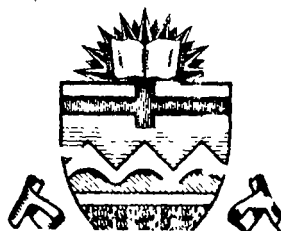
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